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THE JOLLY PARDS TO THE RESCUE



THE JOLLY PARDS' HOME COMING.

OR,

The Jack of Hearts.

A Tale of Hide and Seek in the
Mountains.BY PHILIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF THE "TIGER DICK" SERIES, THE
"PATENT-LEATHER JOE" SERIES, THE
"JOLLY PARDS" SERIES, "A
HARD CROWD," "LITTLE
JINGO," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE JACK OF HEARTS.

"So this is Paddy's Flat?"
 "You bet, pard! An' a rushin' leetle place it
 is, too."
 "What makes it rush?"

"Waal, they've got the dust, fur one thing."
 "Hum! That's supposed to make most things rush, I believe. Anything else?"

"They do 'low as, hyer an' yon, ye kin pick up at the Flat a galoot as has a slight with the pasteboards."

"Oh, no! Ye can't strike me on that lay, Johnny. I'm going straight through."

"Maybe you're a mite that way yerself?"

The stage-driver looked out of the corner of his eye at the chatty passenger who rode beside him on the box.

Suppose we follow suit, taking advantage of the pause that succeeded this "leader," the stranger quietly ignoring the effort to draw him out.

That he was a "sport," the whole style and get-up of the man declared.

From his soft felt hat, with its gracefully curved brim, to his high-heeled patent-leathers, all was elegance and scrupulous neatness.

His hands were so white and soft as to suggest the use of cosmetics. Every movement of his long, taper fingers evinced the suppleness which accompanies manipulative skill.

He might be a pianist. In that country, it was more likely that he had turned his talents toward the card-table.

Not to make a mystery of what he had no thought of hiding from the world—certainly not from simple Dave Pritchard, the stage-driver—this was none other than the famous Jack Downing, of 'Frisco—the Jack of Hearts, as his friends affectionately called him, in token of his almost universal conquest over the frivolous fair.

"They've struck a new kink lately," pursued Dave, accepting with a good grace the silence of the other, as a hint that he had been a little "fresh."

"Ah?" responded Jack, absently, scanning through lazy, half-shut eyes the mining-camp they were approaching.

"Judge Owney Maglochlin has taken the Flat into his circuit, an' the boys is havin' jest one rustlin' time over the new broom, you bet."

"Yes," yawned the Jack of Hearts, indifferently. "The place looks as if it had been struck by a New England Sunday."

"Reckon the Court's a-settin' on some on-lucky devil, an' the boys is all in the Terpsichorean."

"Terpsi—what did you say?"

"The Terpsichorean Hall."

"Ah! fine name. Is the proprietor a college professor, or only—"

"What!—Dinny McGee?"

"Then it wasn't his idea."

"His idee! I 'low he ain't troubled that way."

"I suppose, then, they're holding the court in the dance-hall."

"That's the size of it, pard."

"Seems to me I've heard something else about the place. What is it? Some gaff about a boy running the camp?"

"That's the deputy marshal."

"You don't mean to tell me that it's so?"

"Don't you throw off on the boy, pard, tell ye size him up. He's a rustler, I tell you!"

"He must be. And he has a lot more of rustlers under him, like himself, in short jackets and knee-pants, so I was told. A healthy marshal's posse!"

"Thar ye're out ag'in', boss. It's his pards—the Three Jolly Pards."

"Yes, that's it. They must make it jolly for the grown men who knuckle down when they crack the whip."

"Hold on!—ho-o-o-old on, says you! The pards—Tom Murphy an' Dick Johnson, the which the last is a coon what ye don't often ketch a-nappin'—they bain't got nothin' to do with the marshal biz. Harry Keene sports a lone hand thar, only playin' to Jim Gladden's lead."

"Gladden? That's his principal?"

"Yes, the marshal. But, pard, ef you'd seen the way the deputy waltzed in a couple o' road-agents a month ago, you'd 'low as he wasn't so slow, bein's as he's a mite under age."

"I should judge that there was nothing particularly slow about him," laughed Jack. "If I remember rightly, there was some gossip about a row with a pretty Jewess, in which he cut a prominent figure."

"Oh, that's all right," was Dave's assurance.

"She's the daughter of an old fraud that skins the boys out o' their eye-teeth. A chap happened along when the court first sot in the Flat, an' tried to git her away from the ole man. But the Three Jolly Pards stood him off, an' run him out o' the camp."

"Well, do you pull up here for a bit? I wouldn't mind stretching my legs, and—well,

yes—getting a sight at this wonderful deputy marshal."

"Sorry, boss. We only stop long enough to water the stock an' take in passengers, ef thar is any. That blasted brace breakin' right in the middle o' that infernal wallow, put me half an hour behindhand, as it is; an' it'll be dark before we pull into the Ford. Worst bit o' road in the State, that last mile; an', excuse me ef you please!—I don't want to strike it much after sundown."

"Then I reckon I can't do any better than to go inside, and double up. It will be a change; and I'll have the whole place to myself—that's one comfort."

As Jack finished speaking, the coach drew up before the Golden Gate Hotel, which flanked the dance-hall, and indeed was under the same proprietorship.

For the first time perhaps in the history of stage-coaching in that section of country, there was not a soul to receive the time-honored vehicle, save the stable-boys, who came with buckets and sponges, and an abundance of profane chaff.

Jack Downing stepped upon the wheel, and dropped lightly to the ground.

He cast a glance of half-awakened interest at the door of the Terpsichorean Hall, from which proceeded a great hubbub.

But Jack had seen border courts in abundance—to his credit be it said, not from the standpoint of "the prisoner at the bar!"—and, really, the novelty of a boy deputy marshal was scarcely sufficient to make it worth the while of this lazy gentleman to take the few extra steps necessary, on the uncertain chance of getting a glimpse of him.

So, with a yawn, Jack Downing turned on his heel, got into the coach, and tried to conform his elegant figure to the angles of the back seat, so as to get into a comfortable position for a snooze.

At this moment mine host of the Golden Gate appeared, quite red in the face with excitement, and puffing and blowing with haste.

"Be me sowl!" he cried, "but yez came that near stealing a mairch an me!"

"A full house, Dinny," said Dave, with the off-hand airiness of a stage-driver the world over.

"A full house, is it? Faith, if it might be the house alone that was full; but it's ivery wan in it that's in the same fix!"

"Waal, ye don't have courtin' every day in the year."

"Whist, man! it's not the court that I'm complainin' of."

"Oh, no! you'd not be so ungrateful. It brings grist to your mill."

"An', be the same token, you've brought nothing along wid yees?"

"And I'll take nothin' away—eh, Dinny? That's even all round."

"Sor' a sowl ye'll be getting heur, this day!"

"They're havin' jest one sweet time in thar, by the sound."

"The divil's own! Sure, it's nothing but *Av it plase the honorable coort! an' The learned counsel fur the defende!*"

"Air they talkin' hemp?—Hi thar, Sam! What the deuce air you up to?"

"You can't tell me nothin' about my business!" muttered the hostler so sharply reproved.

"I kin send this whip-cracker huntin' a tender spot in your hide; an' hang me ef I don't do it, ef you don't let that thar hoss alone!"

"They've not come to the hemp yet," said Dinny, this little exchange of civilities between the stage-driver and the delinquent hostler being of too little importance to divert the conversation. "It's a matter out o' the ordinary that's implyin' them."

"What's that?"

"Well, yez see—"

But, at this point Dinny broke off abruptly, with an astonished ejaculation under his breath.

"Waal, I swar!" exclaimed Dave Pritchard, following the direction of Dinny's glance.

The hubbub in the court-room had increased, until it sounded as if a free fight were imminent. While it was at its height, the door of the dance-hall was thrown open, and from it issued a man carrying the slight figure of a young girl in his arms.

She hung limp. Dave Pritchard's first idea was that she had been hurt; and his immediate impulse was to leap from his seat and rush into the crowd, to wreak vengeance on the man who had dared to lift his hand against her.

A second glance revealed the fact that she was unconscious.

"Who is it? It can't be old Abraham's daughter?" he exclaimed.

"Owld Abraham? To the divil wid 'um!" cried Dinny, indignantly. "That's her father, man."

"Her what?"

"Whist! He's comin' this way!"

CHAPTER II.

SALOMANS CARRIES THE DAY.

IT was not without reason that all of Paddy's Flat was assembled in Terpsichorean Hall, even to the neglect of the glories of the incoming stage.

For over a year, an old Jew merchant, whom nobody suspected of anything more romantic than a life-long study of how to palm off shoddy goods from Connecticut as "imbordations from Paris," had secreted a beautiful young girl in his house.

Then, with the first sitting of a legally constituted court, had come a stranger, who claimed her as his child, summoning the old Hebrew to the bar of justice, to answer to the charge of abduction and unlawful detention.

But the girl was spirited off by the Three Jolly Pards, and the stranger fairly drummed out of the camp.

Relying upon the public sentiment thus expressed, the friends of the beautiful Jewess had returned her to her home immediately upon the adjournment of the court.

But enough time had not been allowed for the disposal of all the pending cases, so Judge Maglochlin had determined upon a second sitting, on his return that way, only two weeks later.

And now it appeared that Isaac Salomans had not accepted his defeat as final. The writ was again placed in the hands of the marshal.

As the first case under a regular tribunal of justice, and his first official act, Jim Gladden had sworn that it should go through "on the square," and had almost come into deadly collision with his subordinate, when he stood in his path and prevented him from being the first law-breaker under the new order of things.

And now, when the boys showed a disposition to lynch Isaac Salomans for his persistence in the face of the popular verdict, Jim stood firm.

"The girl has a right to hear what her father has to say. When he's done, ef she says *go*, then go it is. Ef she says *stay*—"

But here the marshal pulled up. It was not quite consistent with his office to declare his readiness even to defy the law, if necessary, in leaving the girl freedom of choice. But the boys understood this, and yielded so much. Fair play was all they asked.

So now the case was up again, and no one, save the Three Jolly Pards, having thus far so much as caught a glimpse of her face, all were on the *qui vive* to see her stand unveiled in court.

Abraham and his wife, Rebecca, were prostrated with despair.

Harry, who loved the girl, felt that he was now about to lose her.

His pards, Tom Murphy and Dick Johnson, wildly counseled open warfare.

"What ef the hull camp *am* ag'in' us," cried Dick, passionately. "We got away wid 'em once, an' we kin do it ag'in!"

But Harry knew better. Nothing could be done. The case must now rest with Miriam herself.

So Judge Owney Maglochlin, as merry an Irishman as ever crooked leg at a shindy, sat serenely on the bench—a veritable bench of good honest pine—while the counsels for the prosecution and defense respectively—Colonel Blood, a fiery little whiffet, and the Honorable Mr. Midge, a bland giant, and both as precious scamps as ever fanned the passions of their clients to increase their fees—sat as placidly in their places.

Isaac Salomans, at the colonel's elbow, was pale, but resolute.

In all the dense crowd that packed the dance hall, not a friendly glance rested upon him. Instead, the boys glowered at him resentfully.

Then the door opened, and Jim Gladden—himself this time—at the head of his *posse*, escorted in the bowed figure of old Abraham and two deeply-veiled women. One was round-shouldered and tottering; the other, as supple as a willow wand, walked timidly between those who were now so powerless to protect her.

At the former trial, the young deputy had been intrusted with this escort-duty. Now he walked with bowed head beside his principal, feeling that he was in disgrace.

As they entered, the crowd burst into a Babel of ejaculations, of admiration and sympathy for

the girl, and of resentment toward her persecutor.

As every one sought to get a glimpse of Miriam at once, those in the rear almost climbing upon the shoulders of the more favored, the whole roomful of eager faces surged like the surface of a troubled sea, each pair of eyes seeming to glare at her with savage gloating.

To the timid girl, it was as if she had suddenly been thrust into a den of wolves.

These were the men—the demons, rather—whom she had been taught to dread, when they should catch sight of her fresh young beauty.

She believed that the terrible crisis of her life was upon her; and throwing her arms about her lover, she buried her face in his breast with a low cry of despair.

Old Abraham beat the air with his feeble hands, crying:

"Ach Gott! ach Gott!"

Miriam heard his voice, and with the bound of a startled fawn, she tore herself from Harry's supporting arms, and leaped into those of the old man, whom she felt that she had wounded by this turning to another at such a time.

Her veil caught upon Harry's badge, and was torn from her head, leaving her face exposed, at last, to the stare of the curious crowd.

With the instinct of protection, even when all was lost, Rebecca closed her arms about her darling, hiding her between her own body and Abraham's.

Jim Gladden ordered back the crowd, and hurried the party forward to their places.

Isaac Salomans rose, pale with excitement. Now was his hour of triumph or defeat. The latter probably meant rough treatment at the hands of the crowd, besides the loss of his daughter.

As he stood there in their midst, he was well worth a second glance.

He had a dark yet clear complexion, a delicately aquiline nose, and intensely black hair and eyes.

He was a Jew unmistakably, yet not of the German type. There was a fineness and lightness about him that seemed to indicate the best blood of the Roman nations.

He might be of Spanish or Italian lineage.

This much he owed to his ancestry, while, as the outcome of his individual life, he had the reckless dash and sparkle of a professional sport, instead of the usual shrewd business air of his race.

His dress indicated that he had used his wits to good account. Take him all in all, he was a good-looking man, whose rather "loud" tone was not sufficiently marked to provoke comment in the West.

The girl, who had never seen him before since babyhood, was fascinated by him. The crowd, too, struck by his wonderful resemblance to her, exclaimed with astonishment; and once more the fickle tide of public sentiment turned in his favor.

In that supreme moment, Harry Keene unconsciously fingered the butt of his revolver. He had it in his heart to shoot this man before a word was spoken.

It was not the instinct of a murderer. It was the impulse of one who would save all that he held dearest on earth. He believed that the girl's life happiness was menaced. What mattered his fate, then, if she was spared?

It required Jim Gladden's stentorian voice, backed by the authority of the judge, to still the hubbub that prevailed.

When he could be heard, Isaac Salomans spoke.

"If it pleases the honorable Court, and begging the pardon of the learned counsel, this matter need go no further. All has been accomplished that I sought. I do not wish to use the law to force my child to go with me. No! no! it is her love that I would have.

"The law has brought her face to face with me, and compelled those who would prevent her from listening to me to stand aside. If now I may speak to her, she shall be then free to do as she chooses."

He stood in the attitude of a man bowed with the weight of a great wrong. He wrung his hands, as if unconsciously, in the anguish of a moment that was to decide all the hopes of his life. He gazed at the girl with the yearning of a great love, long denied its satisfaction. Tears were in his sad eyes.

A hush fell upon the crowd. It was plain that every spectator was deeply affected.

Judge Owey Maglochlin, like the impulsive Irishman he was, sprung up and grasped this superb actor's hand.

"Be the sowl o' me body, I b'lave ye're an honest mon!" he cried.

Isaac Salomans wrung the cordial hand, too much moved seemingly to express his thanks.

The judge then turned to Miriam, who sat between Abraham and Rebecca, and said:

"Look ye, my gerrul! Do yez think this owld mon, that's meself, would do yez the least taste o' harrum?"

Miriam looked at him without replying.

"Come now!" he ejaculated, patting her on the head. "Ye're a foiner gerrul, so ye be; an' it's the divil's shame to kape yer face hid undher a bushel, the way they tell me this owld spalpeen has been ch'atin' all the b'ys o' their just dues. But we'll mend all that, plaze the Lord!"

And he winked at Harry.

"Now b'lave me, my child, ye're not goin' fur to be hurted. Just hairken till this gint. Luck at um! Has he the taste bit o' hairrum in him, at all, at all? Faith, he axes yez only the taste of a worrud, an' then ye go yer ways if ye will."

Miriam looked at her unknown father.

Isaac Salomans drew from an inner pocket an envelope, from which he took a package carefully wrapped in tissue paper.

With the touch of tenderness he removed several coverings, and shen gazed for a moment at a photograph which he thus brought to light.

From the photograph he looked at Miriam, and advancing, extended it to her, in silence.

The girl gazed at the photograph, yet fearing to touch it.

"My picture!" she exclaimed, in an involuntary whisper.

Then she looked at the man before her, in astonishment at his having it in his possession.

"It is the picture of your mother," he said, sadly.

"My mother?" exclaimed the girl, opening her eyes wide.

Then she turned and looked at Rebecca, whom she supposed to be her mother.

The old woman bowed her face in her hands, and moaned aloud.

"My mother!" repeated Miriam, and turned to Abraham for explanation.

He could not look her in the face. The terrible moment that Harry had warned him against was upon him. His own obstinacy had brought it.

For a moment the girl sat trembling, gazing from one to another, but ever back again at the picture.

Suddenly she sprung to her feet, and beating the air with her hands, to repel the picture and the man who had brought this agonizing doubt upon her, cried:

"Go away! go away! I'm afraid of you!"

And whirling, she cast herself upon Rebecca, clasping the old woman in her arms, and crying:

"Mamma! mamma! my own mamma!"

She felt as if she were on the point of being robbed of her nearest and dearest.

"And you can turn your back upon your dead mother?" asked Salomans.

Miriam clutched her supposed mother only the more tightly.

But Rebecca could stand this no longer.

"It is true! true!" she sobbed.

"True?" cried Miriam, starting away from her.

"What is true?"

"That I am not your mother!"

"And he?"—pointing at Abraham—"he is not my father?"

The old man answered neither by word or look.

"You have been deceiving me all my life!" cried the girl, in sudden wild grief and indignation.

Without warning she snatched the photograph out of Salomans's hand, and fell to kissing it and crying over it.

"Dis is my mamma—my own true mamma! Ah! dey have robbed me!"

"Thank Gott! thank Gott!" murmured Salomans.

"And you!—who are you?" demanded Miriam, turning abruptly to him.

"Can't you guess?" he asked. "Why have I carried that picture in my bosom these many, many weary years? Why have I wandered over the face of all this broad country, searching for you?"

"Who are you?" repeated Miriam, seizing hold of him with both hands, with the sharp petulance of a child.

"Your father!" he replied, with infinite tenderness.

"Is dot true?" she demanded, turning fiercely upon old Abraham.

He set his teeth doggedly, and made no reply.

All was lost. What was the use of words?

"It is true! it is true!"

With a sharp cry, as if her heart were break-

ing, she suddenly threw her arms about Salomans's neck, crying:—

"Take me away! Take me to my mamma! Ah, those cruel people, they have kept me from you!—they have robbed me of my mamma! All my life long they have lied to me!"

Salomans clasped her in his arms, and bowing his face to hers, wet it with his tears.

So far the "boys" had stared at this scene with open mouths. Now a murmur of rage began to rise. Wrathful eyes glared at Abraham from every side.

"Snake him out o' this!" suddenly shouted a voice. "The old fraud!"

The crowd surged. Harry started, as if out of a dream.

"Hold!" he cried, springing before Abraham, with drawn revolver. "The man who lays a finger on him dies in his tracks!"

But here Jim Gladden interfered:

"Stand back!" he commanded.

Meanwhile, with excess of emotion Miriam had lapsed into unconsciousness.

Her father lifted her in his arms.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked of the judge.

"What have you to say against this man's claim?" inquired Judge Maglochlin, of Abraham.

The old man shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

The judge turned to Salomans, who was waiting for his decision.

"The gerrul has settled it herself," he said.

"Take her away. It's her own words."

Without more ado, Salomans walked through the crowd, and out of the court-room.

The lover stood dumb!

Outside was the waiting coach.

"Driver, have you room for two passengers more?"

"You bet! All the room ye want."

"And you are ready to start at once?"

"It's only a crack o' the whip, an' we're off."

"Then lose no time."

"Hadn't you better stop to git a bonnet fur the—the—lady? We ain't in such a sweat as all that comes to."

"I wish nothing—she will want nothing—to remind her of her past. Take us as we are. Drive on."

And throwing open the coach door, the man entered with the insensible girl in his arms.

As he did so, Jack Downing leaped up, exclaiming:

"The deuce; Salomans? Is this you?"

"Ah! the Jack of Hearts!"

"But what have you there? Here! put her on this seat. But what's the matter? You must be crazy, man, to set out like this."

"All right?" cried Dave the driver.

"All right!" responded Salomans.

There was a crack of the whip like a pistol-shot, and then the lurch and swaying of the coach, and the roar of the wheels.

They were off; and the unconscious girl lay in the comfortable berth that the Jack of Hearts had fixed for himself, while he sat gazing at her wan beauty with a wondering stare.

Among the crowd that had poured out of the Terpsichorean Hall, some just in advance and others upon the heels of the bearer of that fair burden, and who now stood staring open-mouthed after the receding coach, were two men to whom a detective might have "dropped" as being in disguise.

On the disappearance of the coach, the rest of the crowd re-entered the dance-hall, not to miss the next trial; but the two whom we have designated lounged away, and mounting waiting horses, rode out of the camp in the direction opposite to that taken by the coach.

"Could anythin' 'n' worked purtier 'n that thar?" cried the taller of the two enthusiastically.

"Why shouldn't it work? Thar warn't nothin' to hinder," replied the smaller, with the churlish air of one who grudges the slightest praise to another.

"You be blowed!" exclaimed the first speaker.

"When you kin set up the pins fur such a racket as that thar, then you come round, and I'll talk to ye. I tell ye, the sheeny's knowledgable."

"You may larn as he's altogether too knowledgable, before you git through with him," growled the other.

"Nixy!" returned the first, with off-hand confidence. "That thar prize-package is a-goin' straight through, waybilled Cale Burchard, Bowlegged Banty & Co., C. O. D. We've seen it off!"

"An' run jest one sweet resk a-seein' of it."

"Thar's nothin' like lookin' arter yer own business."

And these precious scoundrels, of whom we shall see more presently, rode on, enjoying their triumph.

Alas for the victim who fell to their tender mercies!"

CHAPTER III.

A COLD-BLOODED BARGAIN.

THE insensible girl whom Isaac Salomans had borne into the coach in so unusual a manner, had his beauty of feature infinitely refined, so that any one could guess their relationship at a glance. Yet, as a matter of form, Jack Downing asked:

"If it isn't an impertinent question, whom have you hyer?"

"My daughter," replied Salomans.

"And where have you kept her along back? You never let on to have a daughter."

"It's a long story," said Salomans, brushing the cold sweat of excitement from his brow.

"Suppose we do something to fetch her round, before you begin on it—if you're free to favor me with your confidence."

"I have no objection to that; but I prefer to let her stay as she is for awhile. No harm will come of it. She is only a little overcome."

"Say, Ike," said Downing, with a sudden side-glance, "you may reckon me a little fresh this morning, but another personal question has occurred to me, if you don't mind."

"Out with it! I'm in the humor for almost anything just now. I may change my mood later."

"Then I'll take you on the fly. What's the reason that you sometimes have a marked Hebrew accent, and then again from your speech no one could tell you from an old Knickerbocker?"

Isaac Salomans smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Dot is a matter of taste," he said, assuming his most marked Jewish accent, by way of jest. "Ven it marks my purpose, you have it den."

He spoke lightly; yet again he passed his hand over his face as if to calm the excitement that still vibrated through him, after the scene through which he had just passed.

Jack Downing's interest returned to the girl.

"Well, what have you been up to?" he asked.

"Getting my daughter back."

"A rather exciting process, I should imagine," observed the Jack of Hearts, lapsing again into his wonted lazy air.

"Yes. I had to outwit a shrewd old scoundrel—my respected father-in-law!—and this young deputy marshal."

"Eh! The deputy marshal turns up again? I've just been discussing him with the stage-driver."

"I thought I'd have to discuss him—or rather discuss *with* him across the barrel of a revolver, before I got through with it."

"In the character of a lover, I'll be bound!"

"Of course. The young bantling puts on all the airs of a full-fledged cock o' the walk."

"But the old man? I suppose he has had possession so long that he began to fancy your claim had sort of outlawed."

"Well, you see, her mother died when she was a kid, 'way back in the States; and the old folks have had her ever since. I was away at the time, and—well, not to put too fine a point on it, they allowed I was a trifle fast for the bringing up of a girl; so they packed up and cut the country."

"Ah! I begin to twig."

"I've been on the lookout for her ever since, after a fashion. I dropped onto them at last, took them into court, and by a little flank movement got the girl on my side, and here she is."

"A flank movement?"

"They had brought her up to believe that she was their child. They had filled her mind with terror of some secret foe from whom they were compelled to flee, for her safety; and also with fear of the rough fellows out here."

"Delightful life! She must have had a sweet time of it. But why burden her with all that?"

"It furnished an excuse for never letting her go out of doors without wearing a disguise that made her indistinguishable from old Abraham's wife, Rebecca."

"The deuce you say! But how—"

"They built a hump on her back, and hid her face under a thick veil. In that hideous rig she rode out every day on a little donkey beside old Abraham. And for over a year not a soul in the camp so much as suspected even her existence."

"By Jove! That tells like a romance! Is it possible! And nobody dropped to it until you opened up?"

"Oh, yes. The thing was blown several months ago. That's the way this infernal little deputy marshal got his work in."

"To be sure! But how did it fall out?"

The Jack of Hearts had been roused into an interest unusually wakeful for him. He gazed at the wan beauty of the unconscious girl with keen zest.

At his question her father's face clouded.

"There was a couple of scoundrels, it seems, called Cale Burchard and Bowlegged Banty, who took it into their heads to rob the old man. They were bluffed by the Three Jolly Pards; but they discovered the existence of the girl. Then they tried to capture her, for a ransom. The same sharp little rascal—that was before he was made deputy marshal—and his pards balked them again."

"Confound his impudence! But he deserves some reward for his pluck."

"That's as you look at it."

"But the secret was out, I suppose? He wasn't sharp enough to stand off the rogues, and yet throw dust in the eyes of the discerning citizens of Paddy's Flat?"

"No. Cale and Banty are desperate knaves; and they bucked against the whole camp, at the risk of their necks. But the kids succeeded in one thing. Not one got a chance to see the girl's face; and, as before, when she rode out, it was impossible to tell whether it was she or the old woman."

"Good for them! I wish now I had stopped to look them over."

"You may have a chance yet. I'm free to confess that I don't believe they've given the matter up—not by a good deal!"

"Well, go on. The rescuer became a regular visitor, made love to the girl under the old folks' noses, and all that?"

"I suppose that was pretty much the way of it."

"But how did you drop to the scheme? You didn't know—"

Again the Hebrew's face darkened.

"No," he said. "I owe my knowledge of the child's whereabouts to this same Cale and Banty."

"What!"

"They found me all broke up, lying in the sun asleep—and I confess, drunk!—before a saloon."

"Well, that's interesting, to say the least of it."

"They recognized me by my resemblance to the girl, and proposed—what do you think?"

"Heaven only knows!"

"That I go in with them, get possession of her, and marry her to the scoundrel Cale!"

The Jack of Hearts sat upright with a start, involuntarily clutched at the pearl handle of a bowie in his belt, and hurled a very round ob-jurgation at the head of the would-be candidate for matrimonial honors.

"This was the price of their knowledge of where the girl was to be found," said Salomans.

"And you made such a bargain as that?" cried Jack, in a fine rage.

"It was easy to agree to anything."

"Oh! I drop to you. That's better. Go on."

"The first thing needed was money; and we were all dead broke."

"That's so. There would be no use in coming on such an errand in the character of a beggar."

"I knew that. We got the rocks, by a little exercise of our wits."

"For which somebody else had to suffer, of course!"

"Of course. You know how it is yourself."

"No recriminations, Ike! We know each other of old."

"Well, I came as a rich man, in search of the child of whom he had been robbed in her infancy by his wife's relations. A free hand at the bar got the judge and the public on my side. I had the pins all up, ready to bowl my respected father-in-law out at a ten-strike, when these beggarly little scamps secured a postponement of the case for three days, and on the night of the second got up a shindy in honor of the first session of the court, at which they floored that whole camp on drugged liquor, threw dust—probably gold dust!—in the eyes of my paid watchers, and even found means to knock Cale and Banty on the head, while they ran the girl out from under our very noses!"

"Bravo! bravo!" cried the Jack of Hearts, roaring with laughter. "Hang me if our young deputy isn't a genius!"

"I believe there were older heads in that scheme," said Salomans, "but I can't just place them."

He then gave an account of the renewal of the struggle, and its final triumph.

"And now that you've got the girl," asked Jack, when the narrative was concluded, "what do you propose to do with her?"

"I don't know yet. Make my fortune out of her somehow."

The Jack of Hearts did not express the disgust he felt at this cool proposition. While listening he had conceived a scheme of his own; and he now saw the way to its accomplishment.

"Nothing easier in the world, my dear fellow!" he cried, with enthusiasm.

"How?"

"Will you let me into the thing on the ground floor?"

"Certainly."

"Then it's just this: Make her a queen of the green!"

"Faro?"

"It don't make any sort of difference what it is. If it was only chuck-a-luck, she'd coin money. I tell you, there ain't her match in the State of California!"

"I don't have to be told that," said Salomans.

However, he looked at the child with a new interest. As a matter of fact, he had not fully valued her. He had not considered the exquisite purity of her flowerlike beauty. Her virginal innocence would possess a charm for hardened men of the world, who would pass by with scarcely a second glance the garish beauty of a woman of their own class.

"It's a go!" asked Jack of Hearts.

And as readily as he had acceded to Cale Burchard's proposition, Isaac Salomans said:

"Done!"

CHAPTER IV.

"BLINDING" THE TRAIL.

At this moment the girl showed signs of returning consciousness.

Instantly her father dropped upon one knee before the seat on which she lay, and put his arms about her, murmuring:

"Miriam, my dear child!"

She opened her eyes and looked into his face in the vague way common at such a time. Then she gave a sudden start, and raised herself, brushing her hand across her forehead, and staring at him and about the coach.

"Ah!" she gasped. "What is this? Where am I?"

"With the father who has lost you for so long. With the memory of your dear mother," said Salomans, in a voice of infinite soothing.

And he placed the photograph of her mother in her hand.

She gazed at it; and then, as the memory of what she had so recently passed through rushed back upon her mind, she burst into tears.

But presently she was seized with an almost frantic desire to be taken back home, for a day, for an hour, for even a moment! She had left without a word of forgiveness to those who, after all, had always been kind to her. Then too, all the little mementoes of her life were there.

Salomans, with infinite tact and tenderness, but firmly, overruled every reason for returning. He had spoken the word of forgiveness in her behalf. All of her little belongings should be sent for.

Could she tell him that she had left her heart behind? In despair she only gazed at him dumbly, and then sunk back in the corner of the stage, and closed her eyes.

Slowly a tear began to ooze through her eyelids. As she felt it glide down her cheek, she hastily hid it in her handkerchief.

"It's that confounded little deputy marshal," reflected Salomans, divining all that she had left unsaid. "Having carried the day against even him, I shall have little further trouble with you, my dear."

And he was right. Henceforth she offered no opposition to his wishes.

When she was calmer, he introduced Jack Downing, as his old-time friend and business partner.

Jack acknowledged the introduction in his grandest style, and wound up by begging Miriam to count him as with her against the world.

"We have need of a stanch friend until we get out of this wretched country," interposed Salomans.

Then, turning to Miriam, he explained:

"My dear, I do not wish to arouse your apprehensions, but I must make one demand on your courage before we shall be in safety. You know of the enemies who have persecuted you in the past, Cale Burchard and—"

"Ah!" gasped Miriam, in sudden terror.

"Do not fear them, my dear," said her father, reassuringly. "They shall not harm you. But it will be necessary to evade them by once more assuming a disguise, for the last time in your life."

"And you can find some use for me?" cried the Jack of Hearts.

"Yes, you can serve us materially."

"Command me. I am yours without reserve."

"We shall pass the night at Fiddler's Ford, and will arrange everything there."

At the Ford Salomans entered his daughter's room, with a plethoric pair of saddle-bags thrown over his shoulder.

"This is your disguise," he said, throwing the saddle-bags on the bed, and proceeding to open one of them. "I left it here, knowing the impossibility of setting out on our flight from Paddy's Flat. I have horses, too, in readiness. Everything has been carefully arranged."

As he drew forth several gaudily decorated garments, the girl exclaimed in surprise:

"A Mexican costume!"

"Yes; we will attract less attention in that than any other."

"But this is—this is—"

She stammered and looked confused.

"A boy's dress," supplied her father, with a smile. "It will throw our enemies the more effectually off our track."

"Oh, but I cannot wear such a dress!"

She was rosy red with startled modesty. Never was a prettier picture than her shrinking maiden shame.

"It is necessary, dear," urged her father. "And no one who sees you in this will know you, or guess the truth, or ever see you again. Am I not your father, and can you not trust yourself to my guidance?"

He was her father. She had been taught unquestioning obedience. Any other course seemed impossible to her.

"I made it myself," he explained. "When I was a boy I was apprenticed to a tailor. I had to make it from a general description of you. I was told that you were about so high, and slight in build. Now you must try it on, to let me see what alterations are to be made, so that it may fit you properly."

He told her the use and mode of adjustment of each garment, all of which were strange to her, and then left her to don the dress.

In a few minutes he was timidly summoned back into the room.

Never was anything so exquisite as this shy little maiden, with her slender figure revealed by the picturesque costume of a little Spanish grandee, in a pose of shrinking embarrassment.

"She is a picture for the gods!" thought Salomans. "She would make her fortune on the stage, if she could preserve that grace after nature had ceased to lead her to assume it unconsciously. But her modesty is too extreme. It will betray her real sex, and spoil all."

To her he said:

"My dear, you make a charming boy. No one in the world will guess the truth, when we have got that great mass of hair out of sight."

"Ah!" she breathed, "you will have to cut it off!"

She turned very white, and tears sprang to her eyes.

Her beautiful hair was her one little vanity—a harmless one, since it sprang entirely from her love. Harry had admired it, and one day had said that he would not sacrifice one strand of it for all the gold in the Sierras.

"Cut it off?" cried Salomans. "Well, I guess not! Do you know the value of such a suit of hair? There are women in New York—for that matter, in any great city—who would give ten thousand—ay, a hundred thousand dollars, for it, if it could be made to grow upon their own heads."

"But no boy's hair is ever so long. Anybody will know."

"We'll see about that. I am not an expert at hair-dressing; but I think I can remedy the difficulty. Sit down, and I will show you what can be done."

Combing her hair from the nape of the neck upward and forward over her head, he braided it carefully, and then coiled it in a mass directly on the top of her head. He next bound about a gay silk handkerchief, so as to entirely hide her hair; and crowned the whole with a heavily-bullioned Mexican sombrero.

The crown of the hat was entirely filled with her hair; but there was no trace of it visible to the eye.

"There!" he cried, looking at her with satisfaction. "That is a triumph. You are a perfect little Mexican dandy."

He took from the saddle-bags a toilet mirror, adding, gayly:

"I am almost afraid to intrust you with it, lest, like Narcissus, you should fall to flirting with yourself."

She looked at her reflection, with a wondering curiosity pretty to see, and blushed rosier than ever.

"But, how strange!" she murmured. "Every one will notice that my hair is so carefully hidden."

"Why," exclaimed her father, "have you never seen a Mexican with his head bound in a kerchief?"

"I have seen so little," she pleaded, shyly. "And there were no Mexicans at Paddy's Flat, I think."

"Poor child!" cried her father. "Well, we'll make up for that. You are to live in one of the gayest cities in the world. How shall you like to see people from almost every spot on the earth, with all their strange costumes, and all their queer ways—not as you see them on the stage, but as they are in every-day life?"

Miriam looked at him in wondering bewilderment. She had never been inside a theater in all her uneventful life. She did not know what "the stage" meant.

"It will be very nice," she said, in a way that showed that she comprehended it not at all.

"It is all right to have your hair hidden," pursued her father. "To-morrow I shall be almost your counterpart in everything. In that respect there will be no difference."

"You shall wear a dress like this?"

"Certainly. We shall appear to be a Spanish Don, and his son and heir, on our travels."

The girl looked relieved. This gave her more confidence.

"I shall not be so much afraid," she said, simply.

"We are in luck," pursued her father. "Your dress could not fit you better, if it had been made to measure. That scoundrel was faithful in one—"

But here he came to a dead halt.

"In the fiend's name!" he muttered to himself. But Miriam was not on the alert to perceive that he had so nearly betrayed himself.

"We must have our friend, Jack, in to see you," he went on, hurriedly.

That drove every other thought out of her head.

"Oh, no! no! no!" she cried, looking as if she contemplated flight.

"My dear, remember that he is a very old friend of mine, and will be as good a friend of yours."

"But I cannot let him see me looking like this! Indeed! indeed!"

"It is that you may get a little used to having people see you in an unfamiliar dress, that I wish it. He must see you, in any event, to-morrow."

She offered no further objections in words; but she was red and white by turns, trembling like a leaf; and her eyes looked into those of her father with the piteous, troubled appeal of a dumb animal that dreads some cruel blow from a hand it has learned to love and trust.

"Courage! courage!" said her father, patting her on the cheek. "I want to be proud of my little girl's self-possession, as well as of everything else that pertains to her."

He explained to Jack the part he was to play, and then took him into the room.

The heart of the gambler rose into his throat. He had never seen anything that so charmed him. In that first moment his face would inevitably have betrayed him, but the girl was so much abashed that she could not lift her eyes from the floor.

There was a pause before he could control his voice; but then he spoke with admirable quietness.

"I should never have suspected you, Miss Miriam," he said. "No one can possibly guess. It is wonderful, the change a difference of dress will make."

She lifted her eyes timidly to his face. There she did not encounter the bold stare of admiration she had dreaded. He looked at her with no change in the quiet respect he had shown her from the first.

She sighed involuntarily, and murmured:

"You are very kind."

In the morning, Salomans went through a sham sale of one of his horses to the Jack of Hearts, and a real sale of the other to a resident of Fiddler's Ford, explaining that he had prepared to take his little girl on horseback, but found that she was too much prostrated to make the journey in that way without prejudice to her health.

To Jack he said in confidence:

"We are going through a farce which I expected to play without assistance. You have only to go to a neighboring camp, with the saddle and bridle over your shoulder; give out that you got lost, and that your horse fell in a treacherous path and broke his leg, so that you had to shoot him; purchase another; and bring the two to the Crossing. The saddles that we are really to use are hidden at hand."

So the Jack of Hearts rode away, and a little later Miriam and her father resumed their places in the stage-coach.

Some miles out of Fiddler's Ford, they came to a crossing with another stage road, running southward. Here they were set down, ostensibly to wait for the southern stage; and the coach from the Ford went on its way.

"This is where our trail will be lost!" declared Salomans.

When the coach in which they had come was out of sight and hearing, he hurried Miriam down the southern road a little way, and then leaving it, plunged into the trackless mountain waste.

Close at hand, however, they came upon a secluded spot, where they found the Jack of Hearts in waiting for them, with the horses.

"I wish you every success until we meet again," was his leave-taking. "Hark! there comes the down stage. It's a close shave. If it had put in an appearance a little sooner, it would have balked our combination. But I must be in time to take it. Good-by, and God bless you!"

He pressed their hands, and hurried away.

So it was he who took the southern stage, and shortly after, a gayly-dressed Mexican senor and a dainty little Don rode to the north.

Miriam's heart hung in her bosom like a stone.

A faint sigh passed between her pale lips, and the thought that went out with it showed the hope to which she clung till now.

"He will never know what has become of me! I shall never see him again!"

CHAPTER V.

LIFTING THE BLIND.

LATE that afternoon, two horsemen rode into a mining-camp which, in characteristic Western style, had been called "Blind Hoss."

One of them was of large frame, with the look of a man who overrode with brute violence every obstacle that appeared in his path.

The other was a stocky little rascal, who made up in low cunning what he lacked in force.

It was almost needless to introduce them, the former as Cale Burchard, the latter as Bow-legged Banty, and to add that they were the same precious pair who had visited Paddy's Flat in disguise.

Both of them looked jubilant and expectant.

"What'll we say?" asked Cale. "Will we jest order him to fork over the girl an' the rocks, an' git?"

"Waal, you air a blasted fool!" declared Banty, contemptuously.

"What's the reason I am?" demanded Cale, sullenly.

"What do you suppose he'd say, ef we come down on him in any such style as that?"

"It don't make a thunderin' bit o' difference what he'd say!"

"Waal, I 'low it jest does."

"What would he say?"

"He'd put it short an' sweet. Go to the deuce!"

"Ain't we the bosses o' this hyar game, I want to know?"

"Not in a camp whar he kin git backin' fur the askin'."

"How air we goin' fur to run it, then?"

"Why, we've got to play our cards with common decency. We've got to stand in with him tell we git him whar we kin drop him out o' sight on the quiet."

"I'm about sick o' this soft-sawder biz. It jest turns my stummick, an' that's a fact. Hyar we've kep' it up fur a month o' Sundays. Now I want to break loose, an' tear somethin'!"

"You jest keep yer shirt on! Ef you'd had your swing, you'd 'a' knocked things in the head time an' ag'in, before you had the pins half sot up."

"You're mighty fond o' runnin' the game, I notice!"

"When I git through with this hyar, I'll be hanged ef I don't cut loose from you fur a blasted fool, an' leave you to run yer own machine to yer own satisfaction!"

"Hold on, Banty! You're as touchy this mornin' as gun-cotton. You know I hain't got no head fur layin' out work, but I've got the

nerve to put it through when you give me the p'int. Call the thing off, an' we'll drive ahead."

"Then jest you keep yer infernal growlin' to yerself."

Cale "took in his horns" very gracefully, considering the sort of a fellow he was. But it was plain that he knew the worth of his confederate.

"Hyar we be," he concluded; "an' we'll say no more about it."

And in a tone of blunt good nature he hailed a miner who was sunning himself before a saloon.

"Hallo, pard! This hyar's Blind Hoss, ain't it?"

"Ye're mighty right!" was the emphatic response.

"Say, now; when does the coach come this way?"

"It's gone through, more'n an hour ago."

"The deuce! I shouldn't wonder, now, ef thar was some place in this hyar burgh whar a stranger would be like to hang up fur the night."

"Up to the Do-Drop-In."

"Yours truly. Ef you happen along up thar, it's my treat."

And our brace of scoundrels jogged on up the street.

That the Dew-drop Inn—which, as a matter of course, had been Westernized into Do-Drop-In—was a drinking saloon with accommodations for transient lodgers, goes without saying.

Cale and Banty dismounted and lounged into the bar, ordering drinks.

"The hearse has passed hyar an hour gone?" observed Cale.

"That ain't no lie, stranger," replied the bar-keeper.

"Ef it had dropped anybody, they'd 'a' put up hyar, I reckon."

"Ur laid out-doors?"

"It—ah—didn't drop a pilgrim or two?"

"Nary."

Cale looked blank, and exchanged a glance with Banty.

He was at a loss how to proceed.

Banty came to the rescue.

"What went through this trip?" he asked.

"Waal, thar was Jim Buckson, o' Fiddler's Ford, an' another party with him. They do say as he's lookin' fur to place some rocks. He'll leave 'em, ef he drops 'em up to the Ford. That's my opinion; an' it don't cost ye nothin'."

"Nobody else?"

"Not a smell."

Banty's eyes contracted slightly, but his face did not wear the blank stare of helplessness that Cale's did.

"I say, pard," he went on, "do you 'low as that thar stage come straight through from—"

"from Paddy's Flat?"

"Thar ain't nowhar else fur it to come from."

"When might it 'a' left the Flat?"

"Yistiddy."

"An' laid over at Fiddler's Ford?"

"Last night. Reckon, now, you was expectin' some one?"

"Yaas, an ole side pard."

Cale stared. He was not equal to any such finesse as this.

Banty drank his liquor with apparent unconcern.

"Mebby you'd like to put up hyar fur a day or two, an' wait fur your pard?" observed the barkeeper.

"We've got as good beds as you'll find in this hyar section. An' as fur forage, we kin stall anythin' but a Jew. They do gag at the grunter."

"When might that thar stage be along ag'in?"

"It's up to-morrer, an' down ag'in the day after."

"Waal, I reckon that thar won't do. 'Bleeged to you, all the same."

And he led the way out of the saloon, with the saunter of a man who was not disturbed by trifling disappointments.

"What's that thar about a side pard?" asked Cale, when they were outside.

"Never show yer hand when the game don't call fur it," answered Banty, sententiously.

"Waal, I 'low thar's a misdeal hyar some'rs."

"Maybe thar is, an' maybe thar ain't."

"What do you propose to do about it?"

"Find out."

"O' course. But how?"

"By goin' to Fiddler's Ford."

"Do you 'low as they've laid over thar?"

"I don't 'low nothin' when I don't know nothin'." After I find out, I kin tell ye more about it."

"Say, Banty,"—and Cale manifested an unusual amount of shrewdness, for him,—“do you jest like the look o' things?"

"Don't you?" asked Banty, following out his policy of not committing himself unnecessarily.

"No, I don't!" declared Cale, with a round oath.

"What's the reason you don't?"

"Waal, that doggone snoozer is too mighty knowin' fur my style; an' that's a fact."

"You'll l'arn to take the fat with the lean, one o' these days."

"Oh, I ain't kickin'—not yit!"

"Jest wait, then, tell you find somethin' to kick out."

"You lead the way. I'm a-follerin'."

And with this understanding, they mounted, and set out for Fiddler's Ford.

It was noticeable, however, that Banty urged his horse to a fair speed.

Arriving at the crossing, Banty pulled up, and glanced up and down the transverse road sharply.

"What's the row?" asked Cale.

"Nothin'," replied Banty, shortly.

"That's a stage road."

"Any fool would see that."

And Banty rode on without more ado. But now he rode faster than before.

Reaching the Ford, he lost no time in seeking to pick up information indirectly, but went at once to the tavern.

"Boss," he said, to the fat and lazy host who was lounging before his door, "did the coach leave any pilgrims hyar to-day?"

"Nary."

"But didn't it bring anybody from on beyond?"

"They went on through."

"Who might they be, now?"

"A couple o' sharps an' a bit o' dry-goods."

"A couple o' sharps? Was they travelin' together?"

"Waal, I reckon not. One on 'em sold t'other a hoss. Reckoned he'd stick to the hearse, bein's as how the gal was poorly."

"A hoss?" repeated Banty, in surprise.

"Now, what-fur lookin' galoot was that thar chap with the gal?"

"Waal, I sized him up as an A1 Sheeny. Thar wa'n't nothin' slow about the gal, nuther. 'Low she was his'n. She favored him."

"An' they went on through?"

"That's so, boss."

"What-fur road is that thar what crosses this'n a bit out yan?"

"The San Milo? That thar takes the State endways."

"Stage road?"

"You bet."

"Reckon, now, it might make connection with the coach out to-day."

"You may gamble on it."

"North or south?"

"South."

Banty paid his score, and added a casual remark about the weather.

The landlord eyed him narrowly.

To be put through such a catechism as he had just been subjected to was not an uncommon thing in that country; but such questions were seldom asked out of idle curiosity.

"You might be a-lookin' fur some stray animals?" observed the landlord, by way of a feeler.

"Me? Oh, no."

And Banty lounged out.

"I b'lieve ye're a liar!" muttered the landlord to himself.

"Waal?" observed Cale, when they were alone.

"Thar ain't no call fur no chin-music," answered Banty.

"He's give us the nasty shake!"

"He's tried to!"

"Eh! You're 'lowin' to foller him up?"

"Air you takin' whatever's dealt to ye?"

"Not without kickin'!"

Cale swore with savage intensity.

"You're wastin' yer breath. Better keep it fur to cool yer porridge."

"What air we to do now?"

"Make a bee-line fur San Milo."

They did so, to find that no such person as they were in quest of had occupied the coach when it passed there on the day in question.

"But, gents, thar was a dandy sharp aboard, an' don't ye furgit it! My eye! but he sperted a sparkler what 'ud make ye stone blind jest fur to come down on it with yer glass optic."

Banty started at this second appearance of a flash sport, and immediately proceeded to get an exact description of him.

"Do you drop to this gay an' festive gent?" he asked Cale, when they were again alone.

"No, I don't."

"Maybe you didn't see him git down off the box at the Flat."

"How do you know it is that galoot?"

"I caught the flash of his sparkler in the sun."

"Waal, what has he to do with our man?"

"He bought his hoss, and then we see him back in the coach, an' our man has gone up in the air, or down into the ground."

"It's a blind!" cried Cale, at last seeing dimly through it.

"I should say so," assented Banty.

"Waal, it's your lead."

"North!"

And away they went again, this time really on Isaac Salomans's track.

At Biles's Flume they learned nothing of a man and girl, but here they heard of a Mexican Don and his son—"a daisy little shrimp fur to look at," added their informant, "but a backward flat when it came to speakin' up fur himself."

Banty "dropped" at once.

"With two days the start of us!" said Cale, when the whole thing had been made plain to him.

But—they came up with the objects of their pursuit at Grub Stakes.

The little Don had fallen ill.

"We've got him!" muttered Banty, exultantly.

"He'll be hard to find when we git through with him!" replied Cale, with a savage glitter in his eyes.

That night they caught sight of Salomans, looking pale and anxious. It was evident too that he was on the alert to find out whether he had been followed.

"We'll lay fur him," said Banty. "When he's jest whar we want him, we'll drop onto him out of a clear sky!"

They immediately left the camp, to lie in wait for their prey.

CHAPTER VI.

LOST!

TOM MURPHY and Dick Johnson, whose words and deeds will soon make them better known than could a personal description, had elbowed their way through the crowd on the heels of Isaac Salomans, as he bore his unconscious daughter to the coach.

"He's gwine fur to cart her off!" cried Dick, excitedly.

"Anny fool would see that," assented Tom.

"But dah's Harry tied up by de leg, an' can't take his own part."

"Did we tie him up?"

It was not that Tom was less concerned than his comrade, but he felt helpless to prevent what he recognized as a calamity.

"No, but dat don't let us out," insisted Dick.

"What air ye goin' to do about it?"

"We 'uns ought to do what he'd do ef he was hyeah."

"What would he do?"

"He'd hitch on to dat 'ah, somehow, an' stop it."

"Faith, you'd better throy your hand."

"What kin we do?"

"Ag'in' the lawyers an' the judge?—not to mention Jim Gladden. Didn't he say that the law should be carried out this wanct, if it niver was ag'in'?"

Dick looked hopeless.

"Harry ought to know dis hyeah," he persisted.

"Go an' tell him," said Tom, dejectedly.

"It'll be too late when he gets hyeah. Dey's off already. Hi! Dah's Jim Gladden!"

With a bound he tore his way through the crowd that had come out before the door of the court.

"Jim! Jim!" he cried, seizing the hand of the marshal, after he had carromed upon almost every one who stood in his path, knocking them heedlessly to right and left like so many human pool-balls.

Jim Gladden, as fine a specimen of physical manhood as one need wish to see, stood looking gloomily after the coach that was half hidden by the cloud of dust that rose in its wake.

"What d'ye want, pickaninny?" he asked.

"Dey's carryin' her off—Missy Miriam!"

"Don't I see that?" asked Gladden, as if resenting an implication that he was responsible.

"But, say, Jim!—you don't know. She's Harry's gal—his best gal, ye unnerstan'! He sets a heap by her—he do, so!"

"So much the worse fur him!" growled Jim, with a frown.

But it was plain that he was not free from self-reproach. Still, he felt bound by circumstances.

There was the law. He had sworn to uphold it. This was the very first case of its execution under him. What could he do?

Was the law to be a respecter of persons? Should he play fast and loose with duty because his heart went out to the boy who suffered from this buffet of fortune?

However, he felt the need of still further justification, even to so insignificant a person as Dick Johnson.

"The girl had the right to go with her father if she liked," he said. "He left it to her; and she said *go*."

"But Harry?" insisted Dick, illogically enough. "He'll have to grin an' bear it! Life would be a mighty easy game, ef we held all the trumps every hand."

And turning upon his heel, Jim strode into the court-room.

"Now it's betther ye feel!" said Tom, with bitter irony.

He thought that this talk about duty was all very fine—as talk; but when it came to going back on one's friends at the bidding of a lot of pettifogging lawyers, Tom, like a true son of the West, said "Nixy!"

Dick gazed after the receding coach in despair.

"Ef Harry was *only* hyeah," he groaned, plaintively, "we free would knock de socks off'n all deir law!"

But Harry stood at his post, pale and anxious, but little dreaming that the rumbling coach-wheels were already bearing away his love. He supposed that she had been taken into the hotel adjoining, and that he would at least have one last interview with her before they were separated forever, if she finally decided to sacrifice him at her father's bidding.

He could not even go to the aid of old Abraham, who rose painfully to his feet, and put his hand on his wife's shoulder.

"Come! come!" said the old Hebrew, in a tremulous, husky voice. "All is ofer! Come!—come home."

The old woman seemed dazed. The thick black veil she wore hid her face, so that her dumb anguish was sacred from the curious stare of the rude miners.

She rose feebly, clinging to the unsteady arm of her husband.

So these two forlorn old creatures passed out of the court-room, that hush of awe which is inspired by deep grief falling upon the crowd, which opened to let them through.

Alone they left the hall; alone they tottered to their desolated home, alone they sat down amid the wreck of their hopes and happiness. Old age and despair!

But the blow fell with scarcely less severity upon the younger shoulders.

When Harry learned of the calamity that had fallen upon him, he stood white and still. He said to himself what Jim Gladden had said to Dick. The girl had chosen, as she had the right to.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and Jim Gladden's voice pleaded—

"Kid, ye don't bear me no malice?"

The boy looked up with a long-drawn inhalation.

"No—no," he answered, passing his hand across his forehead.

"I had to do it," said Jim, sadly.

"Of course you did. That's all right, Jim."

"You know I'd 'a' stood by you while wood growed an' water run?"

"Yes, Jim; yes."

The marshal turned away reluctantly, and went about his duties. In his heart he execrated the man who had raised this cloud between him and the boy whom he loved with the kind of affection that binds the heroes of the mountains and plains to one another to the death.

With leaden feet Harry walked away, seeking solitude in the first throes of his pain, like a wild beast when wounded.

Later he came back to the camp, and went to old Abraham's.

The house was dark and desolate. The old people sat in the living room, back of the store, sat there alone, in silence, in darkness.

Harry sat down among them, and no one said a word.

It was worse than if a corpse lay in the adjoining room. The atmosphere of the room seemed thick, heavy, stifling, like the pent air of a tomb!

To sit thus amid the ghosts of memory was unendurable. Our hero rose and left those whom he was powerless to console—he who so needed consolation himself.

On the morrow the store was closed, the shutters remained up.

Old Rebecca lay in her bed, with her eyes shut, motionless, uncomplaining, waiting—for what?

Abraham sat bowed beside her, with his eyes fixed upon her white face.

How deep the seams were! How pathetic the tremor of the thin lips!

So Harry found them.

"This will never do!" he declared.

And he installed a kind-hearted Irishwoman in the house, to set the home-life going again, and so to win these poor old souls back from the tomb-like chill that had paralyzed them.

Meanwhile, the business of the court went on. The boys shook their heads over the sentence of the road-agents to imprisonment for a term of years. After the spicy work of stringing such characters up to a limb of the red cedar that grew before the Terpsichorean Hall, that was rather flat.

Then the court resumed its circuit. Jim Gladden was called upon by a neighboring marshal to lend his skill to the apprehension of some knights of the road who were making an adjoining county notorious by their exploits. Harry Keene was left in charge of Paddy's Flat.

He had enjoyed this distinction but a single day, when three horsemen rode into the Flat, asked for the marshal, and were referred to him.

CHAPTER VII.

TO THE RESCUE.

THE strangers were three Irishmen, of as many different types of Hibernian manhood.

Tim Buckley was in middle life, wore a fringe of beard following the line of his throat, and walked with his hands folded under his coat-tails, in imitation of the "gentlemen o' the owiden toime."

Reddy Scully was a "brick-top," with beauty-spots—invidiously called freckles—in such profusion as to quite obscure his otherwise fine complexion.

Pat Mallory, of powerful build, had the bullet head and pugnacious jaw of a prize-fighter.

All three of these men agreed in one respect—they were pale with dogged purpose, their eyes glittering with a wolfish thirst for revenge.

Mallory scanned our young hero with a look that was almost contemptuous.

"An' is this the mairshal?" he demanded.

"The deputy marshal," corrected Harry, coloring slightly, yet also beginning to bristle.

"Be me soul, it's a bit of a mairshal, or deppity, or what-not, that contints Paddy's Flat!"

Mallory had made this same objection upon being referred to the deputy, but he had got for his reply:

"Stranger, don't you throw off on that boy till you size him up. He's little, but he's loud!"

Now Harry said in his own behalf:

"I believe that I do content the Flat. And don't forget that Napoleon was but a bit of a corporal."

"Napoleon, is it? Belike I've heard of him before. A Frog-ater, wasn't he?"

"He was known better as the king-eater."

"Well, that's nather heur nor thayer. Ther's no kings in this country fur anny one to 'ate."

"If you'll give me a whack at you, I'll see if I am deputy marshal enough to satisfy you."

"It's not at me that yez nade be whackin', gossoon. Faith, it's meself that has the achin' in me bones to git a whack at a maraudin' divil that's lately been in yer camp, I'm told."

"Who's that?"

"A thafe of a shaney!"

"A what?" cried Harry, with a start.

"Isaac Salomans, the curse o' Crummel an' 'um!"

"Isaac Salomans!"

"No less."

"But what of him? What has he done to you?"

"A thrife! Cl'aned out the crowd of uz!"

At which sarcasm Reddy Scully and Tim Buckley broke out in fierce execrations.

"What do you mean?" asked our hero, beginning to tremble.

"I m'ane that this thafe o' the worruld and his two pards have robbed us of ivery grain o' dust we had to the fore."

"Robbed you!"

"Robbed us!" Didn't you never hear tell o' the loike o' that before?"

"But his pards you spoke of."

"Cale Burchard—"

"The divil fly away wid 'um!" burst in Reddy Scully.

"Ay! ay! I'll grind his bones to powder wan o' these days!" added Tim Buckley.

"And Bewlegged Banty?" cried Harry, breathlessly.

"No less, curse 'um!" assented Mallory.

Harry stood staring, with his mouth open, struck in a heap.

"You know the spalpeens?" asked Mallory.

"Know them? I have reason to! And you are sure that these men are pards of Isaac Salomans?"

"Well, I know it to the tune of thirty-five thousand dollars!"

"Ah! That's where his wealth came from! And Miriam— Good heavens!"

But it was no time for idle repining.

"Tell me all about it," he urged, beginning to show his metal in a sudden rigidity of the muscles all over his body.

"It's but a taste to tell. Thayre's me, an' Reddy Scully, thayre, an' Tim Buckley—faith, we came up from the Isthmus in a sea-coffin, along wid a lot more of unlucky divils. Who but Reddy had the shakes an' 'um, along o' the h'athen wather o' the divil's own country, that he'd not sthand on his two feet? An' didn't Tim have a bout wid Yallah Jack, bod luck til 'um! As fur meself, well, I shtud it well enough. So they fed us on rotten meat an' wormy beans till the scurvy tuck us, an' them as we put overboard into the salt-wather ocean had the luck wid 'um."

Scully and Buckley showed by sullen shakes of the head and muttered cath that that sea-voyage had been one of horrors not pleasant to recall.

"Well, we wint to pieces an the rocks a hundhred miles or so below 'Frisco; an' divil a taste of anny en board but me, an' Reddy Scully, thayre, an' Tim Buckley, came up out o' the wather alive. So we futed it to 'Frisco, an' shock han's an it to shtand by one another, make or break."

"It was make wid us from the shtairt, till we see thim maraudin' divils—the shaney an' his two pards. He wint in pardsers wid us; the two o' them salted a mine; an' who but him bought it wid our dust—thirty-five thousand dollars, or I'm a liar!—an' made off, the lot o' them!"

At this climax all three of the victims of this oft-repeated mining-trick fell to swearing savagely.

"But how came you to let men who were pardners take you in like that?" asked Harry.

"Did anny one know that they were pardners? Wasn't the wan o' them *our* pards, d'ye moind, an' the other two shtangers to 'um?"

"Ah! I see. They rung in a cold deal on you. And now, what do you propose to do about it?"

"We've sworn to folly them to kingdom-come, but we'll get the dust back, an' their blood, too!"

"I'm with you!" cried our hero.

And in a few words he detailed his own cause for revenge against the swindlers.

Having set the Irishmen on their track, he hastened off to find his own pards.

"What's the row now?" asked Tom Murphy, seeing his excited face.

"Row enough!" replied Harry. "Pards, are you to stand by me through thick and thin?"

"Dah ain't no disccunt on dat."

"Divil a dis!"

"The expenses shall come out of my share of what we made out of the show biz."

"G'way dah! Don't you say nuffin' 'bout 'spenses!"

"Is it pards we are, till it comes to the spending of a thrife o' money?" cried Tom. "Divil swape the loike o' *thim* pards!"

Without stopping to argue this point, Harry recounted what he had learned.

"I tell you what it is, pards," he concluded, "it's Cale Burchard and Banty from the ground up. They have got hold of this Salomans, and have made use of him to get Miriam into their power. God help us! they have succeeded only too well! But what is to become of her? Even if her father is not scoundrel enough to sacrifice her—which I believe he is—Cale and Banty will not make two bites of him, if he stands in their way."

"Don't say anudder word!" cried Dick. "Me an' Tom is after dem rapsallions, bot-foot; an' ef you wasn't tied up hyeah by de leg—"

"Tied!" shouted Harry. "Do you suppose I will stay tied?"

"But what'll Jim say, ef you shake him ag'in?"

"It don't make any difference what he says! I'll manage that. But is it a go, Tom?"

"A go, is it? Don't ye insult me, mon!"

Harry wrung the hands of his generous pards.

"I'll never forget you, fellows!" he said. "Hurry up, and get everything ready for an instant start, while I fix things with the boys about my jumping my office."

Tom and Dick rushed off to get horses and provisions, blankets and bullets, in readiness.

Harry ran toward the center of the camp, before the Terpsichorean Hall, shouting at the top of his lungs:

"Oh, yes! oh, yes! oh, yes!"

The effect of this summons was such as is seen only in a Western mining-camp. The boys came "tumbling up" from every direction, on the keen jump.

In an almost incredibly short period, the young deputy marshal was haranguing a crowd of eager listeners.

"Boys, I can't tell you the reason for my action, but it is absolutely necessary for me to leave here as soon as I can get into the saddle. I know that my duty as deputy marshal calls me to stick by my post in the absence of Jim Gladden, and that I haven't been so faithful in the past as to make this desertion excusable on that score. But there are situations before which every consideration must yield, and the present is one of them."

"What I have called you together for, is to have you elect a man in my place; and when Jim gets back, he can expel me from the force, and make his own selection of my successor. I hope the next man will serve him and the Flat better."

As briefly as he spoke, it was plain that the young deputy did not look forward with indifference to the disgrace of being degraded from his office.

But the boys declared that no such penalty should fall upon him. They knew the circumstances of his dereliction of duty in the past, and heartily sympathized with him. Nowhere in the world are the technicalities of the law so little regarded as among these headlong mountain-men. They are so used to desperate remedies for desperate cases, that they do not appreciate the benefits of a more orderly, if slower, mode of procedure.

A man was raised from the crowd to Harry's place; and with scarcely more than a wave of the hand in acknowledgment, he ran off to Abraham's.

There everything was as it had been ever since Miriam's loss. Rebecca seemed to hang between life and death, and Abraham sat like a man whose brain was paralyzed.

"Cheer up, dear friends!" cried Harry, bursting in upon them. "We are going for Miriam!"

Abraham looked up with a start, but after a momentary stare at the bearer of glad tidings, he sunk back to his old position of despair, shaking his head gloomily.

Rebecca, who had been lying with her eyes closed, opened them, and turned them upon the speaker. From their cavernous depths, they looked like coals of fire set in the eye-sockets of a skull.

"Haf you come to kill her, by raising false hopes, to be followed only by disappointment?" asked Abraham, glancing sadly at his wife. "She is dying fast enough already!"

"But the Three Jolly Pards are sworn—"

"To conquer her will?" interposed the old man, meaning Miriam's.

"No! To expose the infamous scoundrels with whom her father is leagued."

"Dot makes not'ing. He is her father. The worse you make him out, the more she will feel bound to stand by him. I know her!"

"But she is to be the victim of a dastardly plot. If her father is not a party to it—which I believe he is—he will at least be unable to protect her."

"Make her believe dot!"

It was plain that Abraham would not be convinced.

As this could wait, while the state of mind of Rebecca was of much greater importance, Harry hastened to her side.

"Do not despair," he said, taking her hand, affectionately. "I promise you that I will bring dear Miriam back. I know what I am talking about."

"Meanwhile, you must not lie here like this. It will pain her to see you looking so ill. She will feel that she is to blame, and will never forgive herself. If you love her, you will get up and get strong again, so that you can welcome her without causing her this bitter self-reproach."

"Bring her back! bring her back!" sobbed old Rebecca, clinging to his hand, and weeping pitifully.

"I will. But you must do as I say."

"Yes, yes! Gott will help me!"

Abraham followed our hero down to the door, and there wrung his hand in parting, so deeply moved with gratitude that he could not speak.

Then into the saddle and away.

As the Three Jolly Pards dashed out of the camp to the rescue, they were sped on their way by ringing cheers. Without knowing just what their mission was, the boys guessed that it had something to do with the Pride of Paddy's Flat.

CHAPTER VIII.

"FAIR EXCHANGE IS NO ROBBERY."

Now, Jack Downing had a head on his shoulders, and one that was something more than a "grub and gabble mill."

He was scarcely out of the presence of the girl who had touched his heart, on his way south from the San Milo Crossing, when he reflected:

"Blessed if I like the run of the cards. Here I'm running away from the prettiest little woman I ever set my two peepers on, and leaving her to Ike Salomans, to be steered clear of the conscienceless scoundrels who are pursuing her with the most sinister designs. Was there ever such a flat?"

"It isn't necessary for me to go clean to Frisco to blind this trail, and I'm going to jump it instanter."

"I have a presentiment that there's going to be trouble. That little angel will betray herself. She's too shamefaced and timid to play the boy. Hang me if I don't make it a point to be on hand when those devils call Ike for all he's worth, and to ante enough to give me a show in the game."

Pursuant of this resolve he left the coach at San Milo. On the way thither he had matured his plans.

The place was an old Mexican Mission, the peaceful life of which had been suddenly burst in upon by an irruption of the outer barbarian.

In one quarter the natives huddled in sullen endurance in their adobe huts, picturesque in costume, but of no account in competition with the red-shirted miners who held possession of the slope over against them.

When these products of a new civilization made a descent upon the fandangos of the older inhabitants, the "Greaser" had to play wall-flower, while the German, the Irishman, the Swede, the— But why quibble about their ancestry? Were they not "Americans" all, by birth or naturalization? So, with the lordly arrogance of all conquerors, they did what conquerors have done since the world began—took possession of the women of the weaker race, and— Well, they "raised Cain," at their sweet will! The refinements of steps and music were nothing to them. The man who could yell the loudest and "hoe it down" with the most muscle was "cock o' the walk."

Jack Downing went to the slope, which had been burrowed until it looked not unlike a prairie-dog town on a gigantic scale.

Lounging up to a shanty, before which a man of not far from his own build was squatted on his haunches, frying salt pork in a long-handled "spider," Jack hailed the miner with off-hand Western frankness, and sat down and entered into conversation with him.

Of course a "pocket-pistol" came into requisition very "early in the game;" and it was truly refreshing to see how it oiled the wheels of good-fellowship.

"Stranger, you must hail from 'Frisco," remarked the miner, as he smacked his lips and handed back the flask with evident reluctance.

"Eh? Why so?" asked Jack.

"They don't set up no fire-water like that around these diggin's. Steve Salter hain't got outside o' no sich fur a month o' Sundays."

Jack laughed, acknowledged that he was recently from the Golden Gate, and said that he didn't like to be poisoned.

That was the last he had, though, and they would finish it together.

Then he observed, with an apparently relishful sniff, that the frying pork smelt good.

Of course he was invited to partake, which he did, saying that the corn-dodger tasted even better than the pork.

He was careful to let his host have the better part of the contents of his flask, while they chatted like old cronies.

When Steve began to show signs of getting a little mellow, Jack unmasked his battery.

"By the way, pard," he began, "you haven't got a spare outfit that you'd like to dispose of for the price of a new one?"

"Outfit?" repeated Steve.

"The whole figure," said Jack—"togs, shovel, pick, pan, and camp kit."

"But why in Cain don't you buy yer traps at the sutler's, ef you've got the rocks to pay fur 'em?"

"You see, it's like this," explained Jack. "I want to go up the country a piece. I don't want to sport the togs I've got on, and I don't want to look like a tenderfoot. There's nothing for it, then, but to buy out somebody who hasn't too strong an affection for old friends."

"Oh—I—see!" replied Mr. Salter, winking hard, and nodding his head wisely.

"I'd take it as a favor—"

"Don't mention it! Ef I sported a Sunday suit, I'd lend it to ye, an' bless ye up hill an' down, ef you hinted anythin' about pay. But to tell ye the honest truth, I hain't got a rag what ain't on my back!"

"Well, what's the matter with that? Come! we'll go and rig you out brand new, from top to toe, and I'll take your cast-off shell. But you're not to give it away, ye understand."

Steve stared, and did not receive this proposition with any great enthusiasm just at first.

Then the Jack of Hearts had the tact to wave the matter for the present, and entered upon a long rigmarole as to what he was proposing to do, meanwhile plying his gudgeon with the flask.

By the time he got to the end of his story, Steve Salter was in such condition that he could have refused his worst enemy nothing.

"Pardner," he almost wept, shaking Jack's hand, and in fact his whole body, as he clung to him for support, "jest you clean me out. Take anythin' what suits ye; an' ef ye see what ye don't want, call fur it. Tha's what kind of a feller Steve Salter is. Ain't that so, pardner? One o' the fellers what ye read about?"

It is needless to say that Jack Downing readily conceded this modest claim.

Then he put a very liberal allowance for a new outfit in Steve's hand and sent him to make his purchases.

The miner returned presently, laden like a burro, as he declared.

And now began the task of getting him out of his old clothes and into the new.

Jack was shrewd enough to know that the bargain must be clinched, beyond all backing out, while the owner of the coveted outfit was in his present humor. Later would come regret and ugliness.

Just now he was willing to do anything. Indeed, he could not do enough for his new friend. The only thing that impeded the progress of the transfer was that he was exceedingly talkative. He had large ideas. What he was going to do in the immediate future would have staggered a bonanza king—in his senses.

But Jack Downing had "been thar" before. He knew just how to handle a drunken man, so as to make the wagging of his tongue only the accompaniment to more sensible action.

Finally, Mr. Steve Salter stood rigged, and smelling like a bale of new goods; and Jack Downing rolled his new possessions up, and put them in a corner to await his claim.

"I'll be back for these things to-night, pard," he said. "Keep fly, and don't take me for a burglar."

Then, escaping Mr. Salter's hospitality with some difficulty, he returned to the coach, which was just ready to resume its course, and rode out of the camp as he had come.

At Colter's Pass he left the stage, bought a horse, and rode back to San Milo.

He had to rouse Steve Salter from a heavy sleep, at the risk of waking the whole camp. But finally he effected an entrance, and began the transformation of his identity.

Steve sat in his new clothes and watched another man get into his old "togs," for every ragged and dirty piece of which he now conceived a remorseful affection.

"Stranger," he said, with a deep sigh, after a long silence of wistful meditation, "it do seem as ef I was sellin' the blood o' my mother!"

"Nonsense!" laughed Jack. "When I come back this way, I mean to banter you to trade back. I'll bet you won't trade, even to boot!"

"Boss, ef you want yer money, an' as much more on top of it, you kin shake them duds quicker'n ef they was full o' tarant'lar!"

"Oh, no!" said Jack, good-naturedly. "When I've got what I want, I always stand my hand."

"I'll play ye fur 'em!" urged Mr. Salter, with a flickering up of hope.

But Jack wasn't to be tempted.

"It must be nearly morning outside," he remarked, snuffing the candle with his fingers, so as to get a better light for the next step in his change of character.

It was one that must have cost him a pang.

If there was one thing in his *personnel* in which he might take a justifiable pride, it was the silken hair that fell to his shoulders in lustrous lines of beauty.

"For thee, sweet Miriam!" he said to himself, as, having taken from a receptacle which was a combination of grip-sack and saddle-bags a small mirror and pair of scissors, he haggled the ends so as to resemble the awkward work of an amateur hair-cutter.

Watching this proceeding, Steve Salter reflected within himself:

"Thar stan's a sharp as is up to some mischief, or I lose my guess; an' hyar sets a blamed fool as has helped him to it. What'll I do with these hyar ornery things, I want to know? That thar sharp has done me in a way I despise!"

In the midst of these bitter reflections, the door of the shanty opened abruptly, and a piping voice called out:

"Hallo, gents! What's this hyar, I want to know?"

Jack Downing whirled round with the start of a man caught in the act.

A moment he stared wrathfully, and then his face suddenly relaxed, and he exclaimed with evident delight:

"By Jove! Just my size! Come in hyar, you ornery leetle galoot!"

CHAPTER IX.

A KNOWING "KID."

WHAT Jack saw was a head thrust in through the half-open door, as if its owner was wary of trusting his precious person within the reach of possible enemies without previous reconnaissance.

This head was made up of a shock of yellow hair and a face the predominant expression of which was that blending of shrewdness and impudence called "cuteness."

What struck Jack was, that the head was about the same distance from the ground as that of the beautiful Jewess would have been, under like circumstances.

In a flash he conceived a scheme that altered all his plans, whence his bluff salute, in keeping with his assumed character, his disguise being now complete.

"Who in Cain be you?" demanded the urchin, eying him critically.

"I'm a galoot what carries a lot o' these hyar things around in his pocket," answered Jack, producing a handful of coins and tossing them into the air.

The alert eyes followed their flight, and the shrewd face broadened into a grin of delight as they fell into Jack's palm with a musical clink.

"Hi! Them's jolly!" cried the piping voice.

"How'd ye like a few, jest fur to jingle?" asked Jack.

"You git out!" said the urchin, with an air of injured dignity. "I reckon you ain't the only sport as kin flash them things."

"I call you, pard! Show up!"

"Waal, you've oversize my pile, I do allow. But that ain't nothin'."

"Come in hyar, an' I'll divvy with ye."

"No ye won't."

"But I say I will."

"What fur, I want to know? You don't owe me nothin'."

"But that ain't sayin' that I won't before the day's out."

"What do ye want o' me?"

"Come in hyer, an' I'll open up."

"Oh, yes! You ketch a weasel!" with a sarcastic wink.

"What air ye afraid of? Won't Steve Salter stand by ye?"

The urchin looked at Steve inquiringly.

"Come in, you blame fool!" was Steve's rather caustic invitation.

The urchin opened the door a little further, and slid in cautiously, standing however with his hand on the latch.

He proved to be a boy of just the size demanded for Jack's purpose.

"If I'd had the making of him, he couldn't have been better!" was Jack's internal reflection.

In dress he was a nondescript. A ragged flannel shirt, designed for a fair-sized man, draped his diminutive figure in folds that suggested an elephant's skin, the too-great length of sleeve having been remedied by the simple method of tearing off the ends. A man's trowsers, so large that the waistband girt his body just below the arm-pits, were suspended by a bit of rope over one shoulder, and knocked his heels in heavy rolls at the bottoms. The only other thing about him, barring the dirt which nature supplied gratis, was an indescribable piece of

felt, "without form and void"—of any remains of a band, which did service as a hat.

"Waal, you want a new suit, an' you want it bad!" observed Jack, looking him over critically.

"You're another!" was the prompt response. Jack laughed.

"Say!—do you know?—I cotton to you. Who air you, anyway?"

"The Kid," replied the boy, somewhat mollified by this outspoken friendliness.

"Of course, an' a mighty sharp one, too. But that ain't a name. What's yer name?"

"Kid," repeated the urchin. "Ef that don't suit ye, gimme another."

"Never!" cried Jack. "That suits you down to the ground, an' you bet it suits me too."

"What air ye growlin' about, then?" asked the Kid, sturdily.

Jack tossed him a coin, saying: "Take that fur yer sass!"

He caught it as a dog snaps at a piece of meat; and it disappeared somewhere in his raglan as the meat vanishes in the animal's maw.

"You pays yer money, an' you takes yer choice!" he chanted, with the pert readiness of a street Arab.

"Whom do you belong to?" asked Jack.

"We, Us & Co.!"

"Eh? Who's yer father, I mean?"

The Kid answered with a wink.

"I ain't that child, boss."

"What child?"

"The wise one."

Jack laughed. He had seen sharp boys before, but not one that impressed him just as this one did.

"Got ye thar, eh?" chuckled the Kid.

"Whar do you live?" proceeded Jack.

"My residence," replied the Kid, throwing himself back with a pompous air, and hooking his thumbs in the arm-holes of his shirt, "is whar I gits my washin' done; but I votes whar it'll do the most good."

And he patted his trowsers-pocket significantly.

"But whom do you live with?"

"Nobody—not stiddy," he added, by way of exactness.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Waal, the boys lets me shake down in a corner when I likes; but I takes mostly to elbow-room, I does, myself."

"And do you mean to say that you knock about the camp without any home?"

"That's about the size of it, boss."

"Haven't you any mother?"

"Any which?"

And the Kid looked up sharply, as if this were an unusual expectation.

"Any mother," repeated Jack.

The Kid laughed.

"Waal," he said, "ef yer humble sarvant ever sported ary sich incumbrance as that thar, I 'low we must 'a' divided the pot between us at a very early stage o' the game."

"What's that?" asked Jack, curiously.

"The ole woman must 'a' took the inside o' the house, an' give yer humble the outside," explained the Kid, gravely.

"Is there no one at all to look after you?"

"Only when I gits away with a side o' bacon, or some sich matter."

"And then they don't find you, I'll bet!" said Jack, falling in with his humor.

"Nixy!" replied the Kid, with evident pride.

"And it's because of the outstanding grudges for odd bits of bacon and the like, that you're so wary?"

"It stands a leetle chap in hand to be fly."

"But the boys don't hurt you if they catch you?" asked Jack, with a feeling of pity.

"Waal," said the Kid, somewhat dubiously, "that jest depends."

And he glanced down at his "unmentionables" as if with the remembrance of an occasional "dusting."

"I'd like to catch a lubberly galoot hiding a mite of a kid like you for a beggarly piece of bacon!" cried Jack, with generous indignation.

"What's that to you?" demanded the Kid, with spirit, as if repelling an imputation against his fellow-townsmen.

Jack turned to Steve Salter.

"Is that so?" he asked. "Is nobody answerable for him?"

"I reckon not," said Steve.

"And suppose I was to offer him a little job with money in it?"

"You make yer terms with him."

"And nobody has a word to say?"

"I reckon not, ef he's satisfied."

"But whar did such a waif come from?"

"That I'm free to say I don't know."

"How did he get into this camp?"

"Afoot."

"And no one knows anything about him at all?"

"I reckon not."

"Whar did you come from?" pursued Jack, turning back to the boy.

"Up Sutter's Mill way."

"And did you live there as you do hyar, with nobody belonging to you?"

"Si Stebbins useter back me thar."

"And who was Si Stebbins?"

"I reckon he was jest Si Stebbins, that's all."

"But what did he do?"

"Drink mostly—an' fight," added the urchin, as an afterthought.

"And what became of him?"

"He got one."

"Got one?"

"Whar he lived."

"He was killed?"

"He was planted," said the Kid, as if this might be accepted as fair evidence of the man's death.

"And who before Si Stebbins?" asked Jack.

"I say, boss," observed the Kid, with an abrupt break in the dialogue, "ain't it gittin' a long while between drinks?"

And by way of a hint as to his meaning, he produced the coin that had been given to him, flung it into the air, caught it deftly, and bestowed it again, with the lightning-like movements of a slight-of-hand performer, somewhere in the folds of his raglan.

"Misery loves company," he added.

Jack laughed, and tossed him a companion piece.

"I disremember," he said, answering Jack's question as if there had been no interruption.

"And so this is your life history, as you know it?" said Jack, again sympathetically.

"Oh, my!" responded the boy, with a sarcastic groan.

It was evident that he was not discontented with his lot.

"You are very ready with that mouth of yours," pursued Jack. "I wonder if you know how to keep it shut."

"When thar's danger of gittin' it slapped," answered the Kid, "and—"

He paused and looked so knowing that Jack jogged him.

"And?"

"When it pays!"

"Do you suppose that I've got enough money to secure that result by the latter method?"

"It's a purty good-sized mouth, so it takes more buttons than it would ef it wasn't so big. Show us yer pile," said the Kid, coolly.

Jack displayed four quarter eagles in gold.

"I'll hev to bury it," observed the Kid, reflectively.

Then, with the positive air of one who was used to making prompt bargains, he concluded:

"That'll do."

"That ain't all," added Jack. "If we make the rifle, I'll give you something better to do than knockin' about stealin' yer grub an' sleepin' outdoors."

The Kid looked at him shrewdly.

His disguise was perfect. He had already made his hands and face look like those of a weather-bronzed miner. Besides, he had been careful that his speech should not betray him.

"When I git the rocks, you won't owe me nothin'," answered the Kid, as if he did not intend to count upon this promise.

So the bargain was struck.

"An' now, pard," said Jack, turning to Steve Salter, "I want you to take this hyar leetle chap to the highest sheeny, an' rig him out in Christian style."

"This hyar'll be a daisy camp," responded the knight of the rueful countenance, with a melancholy shake of the head, "ef you put us all in bran'-new outfits!"

"I draw the line at my friends," laughed Jack.

Steve looked as if he would have replied, "Save me from my friends!" if he had been familiar with the quotation.

But the Kid here asserted his own dignity.

"Look a-hyar, boss," he interposed. "I reckon I kin do my own shoppin'. What fur do you 'low to tie me to a gran'mother?"

"But who will sell you a new outfit?" asked Jack.

"Ole Mose," replied the Kid, not catching his objection.

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Jack, sarcastically. "He's likely to believe that you've got the rocks to pay fur 'em."

"Won't I flash the shekels? An' what's the reason he won't come down?"

"He'll drop onto your money, an' ask you how you come by it."

"What!—a sheeny?" cried the Kid, with supreme contempt.

"I reckon you'll do!" said Jack, coming to a sudden resolve.

He gave the Kid the money, and told him what sort of a suit to buy, adding further instructions as to where he was to go and wait for his patron's appearance.

It was now daybreak; and the two new allies parted at the door of the shanty in which they had met, leaving the knight of the rueful countenance sitting with folded hands and sighing dismally in the discomfort of his new "rag-out."

"If you don't commit suicide before I get back," was Jack's laughing leave, "I'll put you out of your misery by trading back."

Salter sat for perhaps an hour, pondering his wretched plight. Then, striking his knee with his fist, he muttered:

"Ef I ever git a show at that ornery galoot, I'll—I'll—I'll *chaw his ear!*"

CHAPTER X.

A HOT TRAIL.

JACK DOWNING went directly to the Spanish quarter of the town, and there procured a costume for himself and one for the Kid, completing his preparations by the purchase of the bronchos and some provisions.

With the last he sent the Kid to camp, directing him to keep "shady" until called for at a certain point in the mountain wilderness between the San Milo Crossing and Biles's Flume.

"As for me," he reflected, "my first move is to get onto Cale Burchard and Bowlegged Banty. Our gay and festive plotters lose their man at Blind Hoss, and go on to Fiddler's Ford to find out what's gone with him. If I can't pick them up by their all-round style, I've lost my sleight. Once I catch on, it will be queer if they get away with me."

He did "pick them up" at the Ford, and so cleverly as to attract not the slightest attention to himself.

"You two will smell out the racket at San Milo," said Jack to himself; "but while you're at it, I'll just drop in at Paddy's Flat. I fancy that it won't go amiss to post myself a bit on the young deputy. I can feel him in the air. He's the one that I've got to look sharp after."

And it was at Paddy's Flat that his sagacity and detective cleverness were given full scope.

Having studied the Three Jolly Pards, he came to this decision:

"They are wide-awake kids, and might give us a rustle if they undertook it. But there is no immediate danger from them. They are fixtures here for the present."

But at this point appeared the three Irishmen, and held their interview with the young deputy.

It was impossible to steal upon them and overhear what they had to say, but the spy did not overlook their savage vindictiveness and the excitement imparted to their auditor.

Then Harry ran for his pards, and they took his excitement as by contagion.

As before, the Jack of Hearts was forced to yield to prudent counsels. He could not spy upon them without betraying himself.

But he reasoned rapidly and accurately.

"That is not professional excitement. It is too intense. Those Irishmen are in some way connected with the girl. In their excitement, the youngsters will be more off their guard than their principal. It is my game to pipe them."

So, instead of following Harry to the announcement of his departure to the men of the camp, Jack shadowed Tom and Dick.

He was rewarded. Believing that every one in the camp was attracted to the space before the Terpsichorean Hall, the boys talked freely, and Jack picked up all the points he needed.

"Soho," he reflected. "Ike has been playing a desperate game. Well, he has given us a nice complication of enemies. Two and three are five, and three more are eight, distributed into three parties, one of which, at least, is at odds with the other two. I ought to be able to play them off against one another, and slip away with the prize while they are knocking sconces."

He managed to get out of Paddy's Flat even before the avenging Irishmen, and matured his plans as he pressed forward to Fiddler's Ford.

Making a detour just before he reached the latter place, he entered it from the west, as if he had just come from the San Milo Crossing, and was in conversation with the landlord of

the one public house when the Irishmen rode up.

While they made inquiry about Salomans, he stood by with the air of waiting of a man whose conversation is interrupted by matter which does not concern him.

He had timed his words so that they should break in upon a narrative about Cale and Banty, and as they turned away he immediately resumed, so that they could not help catching what he said.

"Waal, sir, ef them scalawags wa'n't Cale Burchard an' Bowlegged Banty, then I'll pass on the two bowers an' the one-spot, every time."

The Three Avengers flashed about as if a shot had been fired at them from the rear. But Mallory hastily threw up his hand to prevent his pards from speaking, and muttered in a low voice to them:

"Hold on, boys!"

Whereupon he turned and walked out of the bar without a word further.

Jack stared at the retreating Irishmen as if at a loss to account for their strange behavior.

"Them galoots has got 'em bad," he observed, and went on with what he was saying.

Without losing too much time, for he did not care to wait until the Three Jolly Pards put in their appearance, he presently lounged out of the bar, to be at once buttonholed by Mallory.

"Pairdner, av it's a kind turn ye'd be afther doin', ye'll not take it amiss av I axes ye what ye know about Cale Burchard an' Bowlegged Banty, as ye was sp'akin' about a while ago."

"Be you friends o' theirn?" demanded Jack, with a penetrating look of suspicion.

"Divil a wan of us!" cried Mallory, hastily; and Tim and Reddy swore with a vim that could leave no doubt of their sentiments.

"Then what do you want to know about them?"

"It's not a fri'nd o' thim spalpeens that you might be, sor?" asked Mallory, warily.

"I?" cried Jack, with well-simulated indignation.

"Beggins yer Honor's pairdon, sure, it's cautious we have to be. Thayre's a bone of contention betwene thim maraudhin' omadhauns an' uz; an' av yez know whayre they're to be found, it's thankful we'd be to yez fur putting us onto the same."

This was right to Jack's hand; and he told them that he had met Cale and Banty, in disguise, on the way to San Milo, and the landlord of the Ford House had just told him that they had been prowling about the Ford asking for a Jew who had passed through the place two days before.

Having got an accurate description of Cale and Banty, Mallory took his leave with profuse thanks.

"The shany will be fur doublin' an' twistin'; but it's only yan two spalpeens we have to folly, to fetch up to him in the end," he remarked to his pards.

And away they rode for San Milo.

They found there that the objects of their pursuit had doubled, returning northward, and that no such persons as the Jew and his daughter had passed through that camp.

"Thayre's a hitch somewhayre," suggested Mallory, not yet divining that there might be a break between the Jew and his whilom pards. "The shany must 'a' althered his plans widout getting the word to the others. Well, here's fur Blind Hoss. We may pick them up all together."

But at Blind Hoss they learned that Cale and Banty had been there before going to Fiddler's Ford.

"And now," said Mallory, "thayre's but wan other way. The lot o' them has gone northward. Bod scan till they're wrigglin', but they've cost us a d'ale o' time an' trouble."

By this maneuver, Jack himself went northward on the heels of Cale and Banty, well in advance of the Irishmen, whom, however, he had put on the alert, so that they would be ready for action in an emergency.

On the way he picked up the Kid, and was all ready for the part they were to play when they overtook Salomans and Miriam.

The Three Jolly Pards, coming last, were told by the now thoroughly curious landlord of the Ford House that they were the third party who had been on the track of the Jew and his daughter.

"I've hyeared about that thar trial up to the Flat," he continued. "Somethin' crooked about it, wa'n't thar?"

"You know that I am the deputy marshal?" said Harry, guardedly.

"The deuce you be!" cried the landlord, opening his eyes wide, and staring with a grin of wondering curiosity. "Take somethin'!"

And he hastened to offer his hospitality.

"No, thanks," declined Harry. "I never drink."

"Eh? What? Nev— Waal, I sw'ar! I never see no marshal, nur depitty marshal, nur any other kind o' marshal, what gagged at his bitters before. But, bless yer soul an' body, you'll never git yer full growth on cold water—you hyear me?"

"I'll risk it, if you please. But I have told you my office so that you will see that I am a proper person to make inquiries about the men who have been seeking Isaac Salomans."

The landlord was ready enough with his information. Harry would have "dropped" to Cale and Banty, even without the testimony of the stranger who claimed to have recognized them through their disguises.

It was true that they had been in Paddy's Flat unrecognized; but then no one was on the lookout for them.

"There is something in this change of plan," said Harry to his pards, when they had left the landlord. "It's all very plausible that he should change from horseback to the coach on Miriam's account; but why, then, didn't he leave some sign to his pards?"

So, when he found that the Hebrew had run to cover, and that a Spanish Don and his son had started up just where he had disappeared, he too "dropped."

Missing the Irishmen in the doublings between San Milo and Blind Hoss, the Three Jolly Pards brought up the rear in the chase.

Reaching Grub Stakes, the Jack of Hearts found Isaac Salomans in a sore dilemma.

But, to begin with, he was very nicely situated for Jack's purpose.

When Grub Stakes first started, the main street, following the supposed oriferous tract, had run east and west.

On it Jake Drinkhauser had erected a fair-sized "shebang," bearing a large sign across the gable end, with the legend:

"FINE LICKERS."

Over the door was a smaller sign, reading:

"POOL FUR THE DRINKS."

Nailed to the door-jamb, a mere "shingle" modestly announced the remaining branch of his business, as if it were an afterthought:

"Grub an' Logins."

Later it had been found that a richer deposit ran north and south; and with the influx of residents a new street, at right angles with the old, had sapped its business vitality.

Thereupon Jake had built a larger establishment, as increased prosperity warranted, facing upon the new street, joined to the old structure so that the latter formed an "L" to the main building.

The bar, the gambling-room, and the dance-hall—all in one—occupying the new quarters, the "L" was given up to lodging, with a resulting privacy in this department such that, unless some one was stirring in the "L," the occupants of the rooms could hold neighborly communication, if desirable without attracting attention.

You may believe, it was not long before the Jack of Hearts was in Isaac Salomans's room, and the latter, wringing his hand, was crying:

"Good heavens! I was never so glad to see any one in all my life before!"

CHAPTER XI.

SETTING UP THE PINS.

ISAAC Salomans was indeed pale and nervous. But at sight of his ally, the color came back to his cheeks, his knit brows relaxed, and his eyes brightened.

"What's the row?" asked the Jack of Hearts. "Row!" repeated Salomans. "Everything has gone wrong."

"But what are you doing here?"

"Miriam was prostrated. I was afraid she was going to have brain fever, or something. I was forced to tie up here, and wait for our enemies!"

"Brain fever! Is she better now?"

"Yes, she has rallied."

"So that you can go on?"

"I was ready to set out again to-night; but—" Salomans paused, and again frowned with anxiety.

"Well?" prompted Jack.

"I'm afraid that those bloodhounds are at my heels."

"Cale and Banty?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think so?"
 "I believe that I have caught sight of Cale."
 "Why, don't you know him when you see him?"
 "He was in disguise. I half suspect that they followed me to Paddy's Flat."
 "At the risk of their necks!"
 "They are desperate fellows, and Banty is a suspicious rascal! He never fully trusted me, I think."
 "Egad! you have justified his doubts. However, you are right. They are at your heels."
 "You know it?"
 "I have followed them."
 "And that is what brings you here?"
 "It occurred to me that we weren't playing our hand for all it was worth. I allowed to be of more use to you, than sitting by twiddling my thumbs, while you played a lone hand against these rascals."
 "But this disguise, and the boy you have with you?"
 "Are parts of a somewhat complicated scheme."
 "Open up, pard. If you can help to get me out of this hole, I need you."
 "Well, Cale and Banty are laying for you in or about this camp. The Irishmen are following me."
 As the Jack of Hearts opened up this new lead, he had his eye covertly on his partner. Salomans started, and repeated:
 "The Irishmen?"
 "Your bankers," said Jack.
 "But how did you know—?"
 "By finding out. How is one to know anything that's worth his while?"
 "Then you do know—?"
 "All about the little game with a pinch of salt in it."
 "I come down!"
 "Of course you do."
 "And I have them, too, on top of me, just at this unlucky moment?"
 "What!—are you growling over your best card?"
 "I don't see it."
 "Aren't they after Cale and Banty, as well as after you?"
 "Ah, yes!"
 "Then what's the reason we can't throw them one or both of these rascals, as you throw a buffalo-robe to a pack of pursuing wolves?"
 "If the rascals were only kind enough to permit themselves to be thrown."
 "That's a mere question of skill."
 "I shall have to look to you for it. I confess myself at a loss."
 "And I have come prepared to carry out what I propose—at the risk of a bullet or two through me, you understand."
 "You are exceedingly kind to expose yourself so for me."
 "I never go back on a friend, nor forget an enemy."
 "Well, what is the scheme?"
 "You and I are of nearly the same build. The boy I have brought with me is about the height of Miss Miriam. I have in my saddle-bags a Mexican costume for myself and another for the Kid."
 "And you propose to draw off these fellows, while I double back on my track? But, Jack, they'll kill you out of hand. You'll never see the shot that lays you out. What use have they for me? It is the money and the girl they are after. They'll salt you from behind the first rock outside of Grub Stakes!"
 "Hold on! Not so fast! Touching the risk—nothing venture, nothing gain! I reckon I've never owned anything, except perhaps the clothes on my back, that hasn't been up, one time or another. As for your doubling—it would be to fall into the arms of the young deputy marshal. Are you so anxious to renew his acquaintance?"
 "What! he too?"
 "No. He three! Of course his pards are at his heels."
 "But what brings them down upon me, right on top of the others?"
 "It never rains but it pours! That's old. They have dropped to your little game. The Irishmen let them in."
 "Jack, the jig's up!"
 "Never say die! When you have nothing, bluff."
 "But they reckon to show me up, and so turn Miriam against me. You know that it isn't so much a question of law, as of her obedience. If they win her consent, all the judges between here and the Golden Gate couldn't enforce my parental rights."
 "Just so! There's nothing like a good vigor-

ous public sentiment. That's what adds the spice to life in this delectable country. Meanwhile, they haven't possession of Miss Miriam yet; and she is ready to run like a March hare away from Cale and Banty."

"Go on with your plan."
 "Well, you give out to the people here, that on account of your son's illness you are going south again, to the climate he is used to. You make the resolve suddenly, and set out at once, though it is nightfall. You will have the full moon to light you; and it will be better for the boy than riding in the sun."

"But it is the Kid and I who personate the Don and his son, leaving you and Miss Miriam the rigs we now have on, and our identities."

"See! Everything is made to our hand. You make all the arrangements in person. At the last moment, you and I make a lightning change, and I am the one that slips out of that side door, mounts, and away!"

"Now let's see what follows. Cale and Banty are on the watch; in anticipation of just such a decamping. They believe that the fictitious Don is doubling, having dropped to them. They give chase. They will not be anxious to fix him too close to Grub Stakes. They will be content to follow at least far enough so that their pistol-practice cannot be heard."

"Meanwhile, our Hibernian friends are taking advantage of the moonlight to press forward. They have a description—and an exact one—of Cale and Banty, from me. They will be sure of them; while, even if they have smelt out the don and his son, there will be some doubt as to their identity. It is my task, then, to run these gentlemen into one another's arms."

"While the fur is flying, the Kid and I go on our way rejoicing."

"The Three Jolly Pards, not informed of the vicinity of Cale and Banty, will be on your trail exclusively. If they are on the road at all, it will be because they have dropped to the Don. Of course they are not on the shoot, and the Kid and I will have a chance to lead them a chase without risk to ourselves. When they catch us, they will believe that the Don was a false scent."

"How does that strike you?"
 "As just the thing, as far as it goes. But, meanwhile, what am I to do?"

"In my clothes and the Kid's, you and Miss Miriam skip as soon as the coast is clear. I will arrange so that my departure will be expected. Later, when every one is satisfied that the Don and his son are not the persons they are after, you resume that disguise. With this start, you can't fail to get to where you can bid defiance to Cale and Banty. The young deputy we shall have to stand off. The Irishmen we may have to buy off before we are through with them. By the time they get onto you, we shall have made enough to afford it."

While Jack was going over the details of their future movements, he was startled by the sound of a piping voice out in the stable-yard.

"I say, you, Mr. Man! You don't want to go loafin' round the business end o' that thar broncho. She's got the spring-halt, an' she's got it bad."

"Good Heavens!" cried Jack, leaping to his feet, as if a pistol had been fired close to his ear.

"What's the matter?" asked Salomans, starting with apprehension.

"Matter enough! That's that young scallawag advertising himself to the whole community!"

And slipping out of Salomans's room, the Jack of Hearts went out to the scene of disturbance.

His manner, however, underwent a marked change. To the eye of any one who saw him lounge out into the stable-yard, he appeared like a man who had nothing on his mind more serious than a good feed for his horses, and the regular allowance of "hog-meat," soda biscuit and muddy coffee for himself.

The Kid was patting the flank of his broncho with a very important air.

A man was just moving away. Jack saw only his back, but recognized Banty!

CHAPTER XII.

THE DECOYS.

"I SAY, gov'nor," cried the Kid, as he caught sight of his patron. "I ketched that shorty foolin' around this hyar animile, an' I jest naterally stood him off."

"I low that that's all right," replied Jack, unconcernedly. "Don't you be too fresh."

As he reached the side of the horse, he stroked her as a man will who has an affection for animals.

But he spoke under his breath in a manner which betrayed a very different frame of mind from that which appeared on the surface.

"Confound you! Didn't I tell you to keep shady?"

The Kid stared, and began to bristle at once.

"Hold on!" cautioned Jack, intercepting his ready retort. "Don't look at me like that, and don't shoot off your mouth so that any one can hear you. Don't you understand that there's more up on this hand than your infernal neck's worth?"

The Kid knew when to "take his gruel without nary wry face." He had lived among rough men long enough to learn to justify some pretty plain talk on the part of the "boss," when one under him has been guilty of an indiscretion jeopardizing the end for which they are associated.

He therefore dropped his voice, and spoke with much more humility than was his wont.

"But, pard, that was jest the reason I kicked at that thar duffer maulin' this hyar boss over."

"You should have waited and told me. I could have seen whether the least had been tampered with."

"Waal," remarked the Kid, with a return to his accustomed humor, "the child's born, an' his name's Anthoay."

At another time Jack would have laughed at this summary disposal of the matter. It was plain that the Kid felt that he had made such amends as was in his power, and if the boss "kicked," why, let him kick.

"Come into the house," said Jack.

And he led the way.

The Kid took his introduction to Isaac Salomans demurely enough, but the instant the latter's back was turned, the young rogue shook his hand beside his ear in grotesque caricature.

Jack caught him by the ear, and gave it a by no means gentle tweak.

The Kid grimaced, but received his punishment without a whimper.

"He's a game little rooster," reflected Jack, regarding this fortitude with a look of admiration. "Whatever else he does, I'd count on his not giving a pard away in a pinch."

This was after Jack had said to Salomans:

"It's time that we let the kids into the thing. It won't hurt to let this young vagabond see the girl he's going to help."

"Girl?" repeated the Kid, pricking up his ears instantly.

"How's that?" laughed the Jack of Hearts. "If she was my sweetheart, I'd be hanged if I wouldn't be jealous of him already!"

Thereupon they went to Miriam's room.

The maiden sprang up from the bunk bed on which she had been lying, dressed in her Spanish costume.

The intrusion of two strangers—for at first she did not recognize the Jack of Hearts in his disguise—caused her not a little embarrassment.

Never was a prettier picture than she made, with the sensitive color coming and going in her cheeks, and her supple body unconsciously falling into lines of timid grace.

And the Kid's eyes—you should have seen them!

"Is that a—?"

But Jack's hand was over his mouth.

"Will nothing keep you quiet?" he groaned, impatiently.

"Boss," answered the Kid, when he was released, "from this out, I'm dumb as an oyster!"

"Miss Miriam," said the Jack of Hearts, with his wonted grace, "I have to apologize for the manners of this youngster. He has sprung up wild."

At this point, the Kid, who had never taken his eyes from Miriam's face, abruptly transferred his interest to Jack himself, his quick ear catching the gambler's altered speech.

"Hold on, boss," he interposed, with a marked change of manner. "Before we throw 'em around ag'in, let's git the run o' the pasteboards."

"What's the matter with you?" asked Jack.

"Be you, or baint you?" demanded the Kid, looking him steadily in the eye.

"What are you driving at?"

"You've been a-givin' of me guff; an' I took it like a lamb."

The Kid's disgust at having permitted himself to be taken in was ludicrous in the extreme.

"You've dropped, eh?" said Jack.

"An' dropped hard," replied the Kid, with a sigh.

"Well?" queried Jack.

"We won't say nothin' more about it," rejoined the Kid, resignedly. "Go ahead with yer rat-killin'!"

"But, miss," he added, turning to Miriam, "I 'pologizes fur myself. I'm a bad sold community. But ef all this hyar is fur you, I'm allowin' fur to stan' by ye while wood grows and water runs! You kin call yours truly, the Kid, fur all he's worth!"

And he made a bow to her that made up in true devotion what it may have lacked in grace.

"You are very kind," murmured Miriam, feeling called upon to acknowledge this gallant speech.

"Don't mention it!" replied the Kid, with a lordly wave of his hand.

"Let us see how nearly you two are of a hight," said Jack.

They turned back to back.

"There's a slight difference in feature," was the verdict; "but as all cats are gray in the dark, you'll pass."

"And now, Miss Miriam, and you, Kid, listen to me, and I'll tell you what we're up to."

"It's about time," observed the Kid, with his lawless independence.

"Well, then, you must know that there are a couple of scoundrels in pursuit of this young lady,

and it is the business of you and me to throw them off the scent."

"We'll do it!" declared the Kid, positively. "The question is, how?"

"You see the dress Miss Miriam has on. I have another like it for you, and one for myself."

"Don't tire yer chin on my account," said the Kid, interrupting Jack unceremoniously. "Ef you was to gas all night, I wouldn't know no more about it than I do now. We rag out like the gov'nor, hyar, an' the young lady; an' while we takes the cold—"

He checked himself abruptly. He was on the point of saying "cold lead;" but thinking that that would startle Miriam, he ended disconnectedly:

"They skips. When ye're ready, let 'er go!"

Again Jack recognized the metal of the ally he had secured.

"Kid," he said, with the terseness of that country where men express a great deal in a few words, "I'll tie to you!"

"The lady kin tie to me," replied the Kid. "Miss, whoever is ag'in' you, has Kid ag'in' h-m!"

"Confound him!" muttered Jack to himself, "if he ever drops to us, he'll shake us for the young deputy!"

But the Jack of Hearts was not much of a hand to borrow trouble. He played one hand at a time.

Sensible of the Kid's devotion, Miriam extended her hand, thanking him warmly.

"Miss," he stammered, with the first show of embarrassment, "ef I had looked fur this hyar, I'd 'a' washed a mite o' the soil o' Californy off my paws before I come. The boss didn't gimme no pointer."

"We'll have to go over you with a subsoil plow before we make you into a Greaser," laughed the Jack of Hearts. "But come! Night is approaching. We haven't more than time enough to make our preparations."

So the programme was carried out. The identity of the young people was changed first. Salomans once more proved his skill as a hairdresser. In the cleverness with which he let the ends of Miriam's hair hang below her hat, so as to make an imitation of the Kid's shock that would pass muster in the twilight.

Then both he and Jack arranged for their departure, the horses being brought round to the side entrance.

Of course Jack and the Kid would carry off the Mexican saddles and bridles, and these Salomans would have to replace by purchase when he came to resume the character of a Don.

Then, at the last moment, the two men made a hasty exchange of identities, and Jack and the Kid issued from the tavern, mounted, and rode away southward.

They were scarcely out of sight when two horsemen dashed through the camp, and with a bounding heart Salomans recognized the figures of Cale and Banty.

"Now, my darling!" he cried, going to Miriam. "Our enemies!" she panted, clinging to him tremulously.

"Have just gone in pursuit of our decoys. The way is clear. Safety lies before us. Come!"

In their new disguise they passed out, taking the road northward.

Meanwhile Cale and Banty had fallen into the trap without a shadow of suspicion. There had been nothing premeditated in the latter's examination of the Kid's horse. It had been only a cover for his hanging about the tavern. His real purpose will presently appear.

On being "held up" so vigorously by the Kid, he had contented himself with a surly growl, and had lounged away, not caring to attract particular attention.

The plotters had waited on the northern side of the camp, intending to let their victims pass them. But as the latter—or what appeared to be them—rode away, Cale cried:

"Look! look! The vagabones is goin' the other way!"

"They've dropped to us!" said Banty.

"Along o' your fly reconnoiterin'!" growled Cale.

"That was a healthy way!"

"It has thrown the game into our hands. The night will serve us better'n the day."

"But is he runnin' fur the Flat ag'in? I should think he'd keep clear o' that."

"He means to turn off at the fust crossin'."

"We'll turn him off before he gets thar!"

And so they rode in pursuit.

"They're after us!" said Jack to his companion, as he heard their following hoof-beats across a ravine.

"That's what we're after," replied the Kid.

"They'll close in upon us when we round this bluff."

"That suits me down to the ground!"

And—a thing that Jack never suspected—the Kid slipped his hand in among the folds of his dress to where a revolver was secreted. He had purchased the weapon when he did his clothes, without a word to his patron.

"There they come!" exclaimed Jack, as his prediction was fulfilled. "Now let's lead them a chase!"

"I've got a clean pair o' heels under me!" observed the Kid.

"But what's the matter with this beast?" cried Jack, when they had ridden a little way at speed.

"He's going lame!"

"Gov'nor, that's the trick he was up to!"

"The trick who was up to?"

"That shorty."

"But it was your horse he was meddling with. And that is back at the tavern, for Miss Miriam to ride."

"Boss, didn't you lock that hoss over?"

"Of course. I wasn't taking any chances for her."

"An' he was all right?"

"Yes."

"Then you d dn't drop to the shorty's game, did ye?"

"It appears not."

"He was attendin' strictly to business, he was. What had he to do with us? It was his own man he was after."

"I believe you are right."

"You kin gamble on it. Jest you git off o' that critter, an' you'll find a pebble forced in under his shoe."

"But we haven't time to stop now."

"We'll have less before we have more."

"I have nothing to get the stone out with, if that is the real trouble."

"I have."

"You?"

"What's a feller's head on his shoulder fur? I'm a travelin' tool-chest, I am! I carry around in my pocket the complete outfit fur a blacksmith, a carpenter, a shoemaker, a barkeeper— But thar!—to cut it short, I've got everythin' but a hot goose an' a thimble. I'll have to let the tailorin' out."

And he stretched his hand across the space that separated their flying horses.

"You're a god-send—that's what you are!" cried Jack, when he saw what he had received from the boy.

It was a combination knife which the Kid had added to the clothes and the revolver.

Hinged to the back was an instrument used to clean the frog of a horse's foot.

"Ready?" called the Kid.

"Now!" responded Jack.

At the same instant they reined in their horses, and both leaped to the ground.

The Kid seized Jack's horse by the head, and in a twinkling Jack had the halting foot between his knees.

"Ah! Here it is. You were right," he said, as, having run his finger around inside the shoe, he discovered the pebble.

A rasping gouge, and the obstruction was removed.

A cry:

"All right!"

A bound into the saddle, and they were—ready to be off!

But the pursuers had gained upon them, and now came thundering around a crag in their rear.

Cale was in advance, and insane with the lust for blood.

"Down with the traitor!" he yelled.

And throwing up the revolver that he already carried in his hand, he blazed away at what he supposed was his derelict partner.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE KID "TOO FRESH."

THE shots flew wild. Nevertheless there was the chance of any one of them finding its mark.

But the Jack of Hearts had accepted this desperate hazard when he undertook the enterprise, knowing that the danger was to himself, and not to the Kid.

Further, it was no part of his plan to fight Cale and Banty. Dead, they would be of no use to him. Living, he could play them off against the Irish avengers.

So, digging his spurs into his horse's flanks, he bowed low over the animal's neck to lessen the danger as much as possible, and bounded away without retort.

Not so the Kid. He had bought his revolver not knowing but he might have use for it to protect himself against the stranger who employed him for an unknown use.

Now, the prospect of a fight inflamed him with a delicious madness. He lost his head completely, and forgot his assumed character. He saw only a couple of arch villains, enemies of the girl whose beauty had fascinated him, and assailants to the death of his pard and himself.

Plucking out his weapon, he dropped it into line, and blazed away.

With a scream of pain and terror, Cale Burchard's horse leaped into the air, and came down in a heap, throwing his rider sprawling in the road over his head.

"Yah!" yelled the Kid, in mad elation at the success of his shot.

And wheeling his horse short round, he sped after his principal.

Jack Downing groaned in despair.

"You infernal little imbecile!" he cried, feeling a strong impulse to seize the lad and shake him till his teeth rattled.

"What's the row now, boss?" asked the Kid in surprise.

"Row!" growled Jack. "How came you by that weapon?"

"By honest purchase, me noble juke! What's the matter with the weepin'?"

The Kid was always ready with a sarcastic retort when any one showed displeasure with him.

"Confound you! I've a mind to show you. Who told you to shoot at that fellow?"

"Nobody."

"Then what did you do it for?"

"Because he shot at us."

"That's no reason for your shooting at him. I took that risk."

"Waal, boss," responded the Kid, with sarcastic

deliberateness, "I don't mind your reskin' yer own hide, ef so be it's to yer taste; but, ef it's all the same to you, I'd rather you wouldn't make quite so free with mine."

"You ran no risk whatever! Didn't they think you were the girl they were after?"

The Kid did not reply directly, but after a short reflective pause, he blew a prolonged whistle.

"You've knocked the whole combination in the head!" cried Jack, hot with vexation.

He might have demanded the offending weapon, after the manner of a provoked parent, but even in his anger he had sense enough to know that the Kid would probably not give it up.

"Gov'nor," said the lad, "I'm a duffer, an' no mistake."

This was his apology, and though it would not mend the matter, it was all that he could do in reparation.

But Jack's apprehensions proved to be well-founded.

Independently of the thorough shaking-up he got by his fall there was little likelihood of any nice idea penetrating Cale's thick skull; but the more subtle Banty at once saw through the cheat.

Instantly pulling up his horse, he leaped to the ground, to ascertain the condition of his fallen confederate.

"They've downed us!" roared Cale, with a volley of furious oaths.

"They've sold us," corrected Banty, more coolly.

"Come! rouse out o' this! Are you hurt?"

"Hurt!" bellowed Cale, scrambling to his feet.

Beside himself with rage, he was about to set out in further pursuit on foot, when Banty arrested him by clutching his arm.

"Hold on, you numskull!" he cried. "Didn't I tell you we was sold? We've got to take the back track."

"Back track?" repeated Cale, stupidly, turning bloodshot eyes upon his comrade. "What do we take the back track fur? Air we goin' to let 'em give us the slip?"

"Can't you git it through ye that them ain't the parties we're after?"

"The deuce they ain't!"

"Would a gal that never killed a mouse in her life be so handy with the shootin'-irons, d'ye think?"

Cale stared blankly, dropping his jaw.

"Who is it then?"

"The leetle cuss what held me up so brash in the stable-yard."

"How do you know that?"

"By his yawp. Didn't you hyear him blow his bugle? But, come! What are we chinnin' hyar fur? Bear a hand hyar."

And Banty caught hold of the tail of the yet feebly struggling horse, which had received its death-wound from the Kid's pistol.

"What air ye up to thar?" demanded Cale.

"Do as I tell ye to, an' talk afterward!" cried Banty. "Snake this hyar carcass over the cliff!"

Cale caught hold of the animal's tail, and together they dragged the body out of the road and rolled it down the declivity.

"Now, up behind me!" commanded Banty, leaping into his saddle.

Cale obeyed, and away they dashed back toward Grub Stakes.

"Now, what's all this hyar about?" asked Cale.

"You seen that galoot what come to Grub Stakes to-day, with the kid about as big as the gal?"

"Yes."

"Waal, he's the flash sport what rode with the sheeny from Paddy's Flat to Fiddler's Ford. He bought the sheeny's hoss, an' then we see him back in the hearse, an' the sheeny nowhar!"

"Eh! you 'low he's standin' in with Salomans?"

"He ain't doin' nothin' else. He brung that kid thar to Grub Stakes, only to rig him in the gal's outfit, an' pull us off the trail, so's our bird could fit while we was huntin' a mare's nest!"

Cale had recourse to his usual relief. He swore in impotent rage.

Banty, who saved his strength for action, went on, cool-headed:

"What do we do now? We turn back, buy a new hoss, an' reach out fur what has the look of a ratty ole miner an' a kid in bran-new togs."

This programme was carried out, with results which we shall presently see.

Meanwhile, the Jack of Hearts and the Kid rode on, not long after coming upon three horsemen pressing toward Grub Stakes.

"There they are!" cried Jack, guardedly.

"Our howld avengers!" responded the Kid, nothing daunted.

"Now for a dash! Give your mouth a day off, if you can, while I do the chinning."

"Spiel yer own game, boss!"

The kid was bound to have the last word.

"Back, senors! back!" shouted Jack, throwing up his hand warningly, and affecting a Spanish accent, in keeping with his assumed character. "We are pursued by two *ladrones*—vat you call?—robber, road-agent!—the villains that plunder the San Carlos stage! The stocky little rascal, Banty, the giant Cale!"

"An' what's that ye say?" cried Mallory. "Cale an' Banty after ye's?"

"The same! They are armed to the teeth! They have wounded my son!"

Jack spoke as if he were frantic with fear and distress, as, without drawing rein, he dashed through the group of staring Irishmen.

"Thim's the chaps we're after! Away we go!" shouted Mallory, completely taken in.

That Cale and Banty should be in pursuit of the Don and his son was evidence of the incorrectness of the suspicion that this was a disguise assumed by

Salomans and Miriam. Then, too, the voice of the seeming Mexican was clearly not that of the Hebrew.

So Mallory and his pards put spurs to their horses, and dashed on to a meeting with the men who had so grievously wronged them.

Now Jack Downing's statement that his "son" had been wounded, led to two results.

It helped to enable him to get through the ranks of the Irishmen unchallenged, but it also led them to suppose that the pursuers were close at hand.

Of course they found no one, even though they passed the spot where Cale's horse had been shot; for the two knaves were spurring back toward Grub Stakes, out of sight and hearing.

This disappointment set Mallory to thinking.

"B'ys," he remarked, "what's the reason that Greaser didn't pull up when we was four to two?"

"Faith, I dunno!" responded Reddy Scully.

"How did he come to know that it was Cale an' Banty?"

"Belike he was in the San Carlos coach when they pulled it up," suggested Tim Buckley.

"Maybe so," assented Mallory. "But why did he tell us? We knew nothing about it."

"He couldn't know that."

"We don't find him, do we?"

"No, curse the two o' them!"

"Suppose that was the devil of a shany after all, an' thayre was no Cale or Banty hereabout?"

The other two swore at the bare suspicion of such an imposture.

"Wouldn't he throw out the bait o' them two spalpeens to us?" pursued Mallory, "jest fur to drive us wild, till he got by?"

All pulled rein, and sat staring at one another.

"But it wasn't the voice of him," protested Reddy Scully.

"Voices is deceivin'," suggested Mallory.

"It's sold we air, just!" cried Tim Buckley, with conviction.

"We'll have a square squint at 'um, annyways!" declared Mallory, wheeling his horse about.

The others followed his example, and all dashed back in pursuit of the pretended Spaniard.

"Gov'nor," said the Kid, the Irishmen having been passed, "when I git in a hole ag'in, I'll call on you fur to pull me through."

Ignoring this tribute, the Jack of Hearts complained:

"See how nicely we should have succeeded in leading these two parties into one another's arms but for your interference!"

"Ef you hadn't been perforated, boss!" objected the Kid, in self-defense.

"That was my lookout. Now, the Irishmen may or may not overtake the others. They dropped to you, and turned back. Ten to one, you've given them the exact clew. What's to prevent them, then, from spotting Salomans? We've got the whole thing to do over again!"

"Spilt milk!" said the Kid, tersely. "Better luck next time!"

"If there is any next time. Now, our only course is to get out of this road, make a detour, and overtake Salomans. If it comes to fighting, we've got to fight!"

"I'm with ye, me boy! That's jest what I'm achin' fur!"

"We must avoid the Jolly Pards, if possible. There is no use in drawing them off, if Cale and Banty are left to dog Salomans's heels."

"Thar's a crossin' somewhar about hyar," said the Kid, recalling their passage over the road that morning.

They soon came upon it, and turned westward.

This crossing was a sore perplexity to the pursuers. Here were three ways open to the fugitives. Had they kept directly on, or abandoned the road? In the latter case, had they gone to the right, or to the left?

As often happens, there were as many opinions as men.

"Faith, what would he l'ave the road fur, having the shairt of us?" demanded Reddy Scully.

"Whisht, mon!" cried Pat Mallory. "Who but him would be an the lookout fur the Jolly Pards? They're an the road somewhayre."

"Would he be knowin' that?"

"Wouldn't he? L'ave him alone, the schamer! Troth! it's not fur Paddy's Flat he's a-makin'!"

"Well, then, is it to the right or the left?"

"The right," decided Tim Buckley, promptly.

"The right!" cried Mallory. "Divil a wan of him!"

"An' whoy not?" demanded Tim, a trifle nettled at this summary rejection of his advice.

It was seldom that he interfered, and he did so now only because it seemed to him a foregone conclusion.

"Aint't it to the west he'd be making? Thayre's nothing to the east fur 'um."

"An' what but that's the r'ason he'd be fur going thayre?"

"Bekaze there was nothing fur 'um?"

"No, mon, dear. Bekaze we wouldn't think it of 'um."

That set Tim Buckley to scratching his head.

"Well," he said, decidedly, "it's by me. Pitch the thrump yerself."

But, having carried his point, Mallory, like most of us in like circumstances, felt less confidence in his theory than while he was urging it upon the others.

Everything turned upon the subtlety of his reasoning. If the fugitives had been less cunning than he, or, disdaining finesse, had trusted to their heels, he would go entirely wrong. Then, in all probability, good-by to their money!

While he hung on the issue, the still night air

brought him the clatter of hoofs on the road southward.

"Good luck til the lot of us!" he ejaculated.

"Here's some one coming. We'll find out av the devil has gone this way, annyways."

And in his impatience he spurred to meet the approaching travelers, followed headlong by his pards.

CHAPTER XIV.

A "GIVE-AWAY."

THERE was one flaw in Jack Downing's little game which perhaps no one could have provided against.

It was probably true that he could not have got the miner to part with his outfit without getting him drunk. In his sober senses Steve would have disdained to sell the clothes off his back, as he would have put it.

But this process of getting the better of his pride left him in that condition in which the most trivial idea assumes gigantic proportions in a drunken brain, to the exclusion of every other thought.

The longer he meditated on his loss, the more humiliated he became, and the more he felt that the stranger had taken a mean advantage of him, or, as he put it, had "done him in a way he despised."

For such a frame of mind there was but one medicine—more drink!

Besides, he must "git squar" with somebody; so, as a salve to his wounded honor, he resolved to go over to the Mexican quarter, and "paint the town red."

This he did, in a most complete, yet not altogether satisfactory manner.

The "Greasers" did not have "backbone" enough to suit him.

"Whoop!" he yelled, bursting into the midst of a fandango, and planting himself in the middle of the floor, with drawn revolvers, his head thrust forward, and his eyes rolling from side to side, so that he looked not unlike a Spanish bull in the arena.

"Come fur me, boys! come fur me! only come fur me easy!"

But, instead of accepting this challenge, the dancers scattered in dismay, the women screaming and scuttling away like a flock of frightened geese, while the men, the boldest of them, those who did not sneak out of the room, stood about in sullen silence.

But was it altogether a matter of courage? Would boldness be a virtue, when they knew that the killing of a miner might lead to retaliation in which any number of them might be massacred with as little compunction as if they were Indians, or Chinamen, or dogs?

However, this one-sided sport soon became monotonous. Voting the "Greasers" a lot of duffers, Steve "shook the hull outfit," and went over to the American quarter.

Here he set to gambling, and drinking and hard luck went hand in hand till he was "cleaned out."

The finale was a very well-founded accusation of fraud, upon which the gentleman whose honor was impugned, disdaining to shoot him in his drunken state, contented himself with "putting a head on" his accuser.

Steve sat in the middle of the floor and wept, until the barkeeper dragged him off to a corner where he would be in nobody's way, and there he slept in a thoroughly demoralized heap.

When it came time to shut up for the night, he was "set on the outside," without disturbing his slumbers.

It was broad daylight when he woke, exceedingly shaky. A sympathetic soul gave him a "sheet-anchor," seeing that he had pulled both his pockets inside out, to indicate his pecuniary state. But he was not yet ready to "taper off," so he hung about the place in wistful disconsolateness.

So it happened that he was on hand to hear the Three Jolly Pards making inquiry about the occupant of the stage two days before.

When they learned of the flash sport, and manifested a keen interest in his description, Steve made up to them like a ship tacking in a chopping sea.

"Gents," he began, solemnly, "look at me! look at me well!"

"My friend," said Harry, "we have no time to spend with you this morning. We'll see you later."

"You see before you," pursued Mr. Salter, not at all abashed by this rebuff, "a wreck—a moral an' constitutional wreck! Gaze on these store clo's! Why an' wharfore is this thusly? Confidence, sir!—a victim of misplaced confidence!"

Harry "gazed," as requested, and saw a new outfit that had begun its career with hard usage. It was covered with dirt, and bore traces of its wearer having received "a bloody nose."

"I'm sorry for you, pardner," was the deputy marshal's mechanical expression of sympathy, as he sought to get away without giving offense, "but I am in a very great hurry just now."

"Who," persisted the inebriate, raising his voice, and waving his hand oratorically—"who, I say, played this hyar low-down game on a self-respectin' an' law-abidin' citizen o' this hyar gr-r-rear an' gul-lorious country? Who but the fu-st-class fraud what ye're a-talkin' about, the sharp what took in this hyar camp, an' took in yer humble sarvant wuss'n he did the camp, by a dog-gone sight!"

"What's that?" cried the young deputy, wheeling round sharply.

"Mh'm!" mumbled Steve, complacently. "Got more time'n ye had!"

Harry turned away again, flushing with vexation.

"Come, fellows!" he called. "It's time we were getting out of this."

He would have mounted and ridden away, but Steve detained him more seriously.

"Hold on, pard! Thar ain't no shenanigan about Steve Salter, ye onderstand. Drunk or sober, when he blows his bazoo, it's business, every time!"

"What have you to say?" demanded Harry.

"Jest this. You limber me up, and I'll open up a lead what'll jest make you git up an' howl, ef so be ye're after the sharp what come through hyar yistiddy, or the day before—I disremember which."

"Excuse me, but that's too thin!" responded the deputy, seeing in this only a pretext on which to secure a drink of whisky.

"Why, consarn yer ugly pictur'!" cried Steve, "what am I doin' in these hyar store clo's, I want to know? A bran' new outfit from top to toe, an' nary rag what's ever stood by me when I was sailin' down the flume on a cedar chip!"

"I say, pard," interposed the proprietor of the tavern before which they were standing, "I shouldn't wonder ef thar was somethin' in this hyar."

"Somethin' in it!" shouted the inebriate. "Thar's millions in it!"

"Steve's been a-sw'arin' about that thar outfit, ever sense he got it—that was the very day the stranger sharp struck the place—an' lettin' on as how some ornery galoot took him in—"

"In a way I despise!" interposed Steve, with a dismal groan.

"If you can give me any information that is worth while," said Harry, "I will pay you for it in money; but I'm not a drinking man myself, and I never treat any one else to liquor."

Steve slowly stooped down till his hands rested on his knees, and letting his jaw drop, stared at one who could utter such revolutionary principles as these in cold blood.

"Great Caesar dead!" he ejaculated, when he could find speech.

"Barkeeper," interposed Tom Murphy, coming to a quick decision, "set out the best you've got."

He did not drink himself, since Harry had had enough influence with his pards to induce them to "swear off" for once and all; but he had not his principal's scruples about treating another when there was anything to be gained by it.

Steve turned to him, and doffed his hat with an exaggerated bow of respect.

"Ye're a gentleman an' a scholar; an' when you run fur Congress, ye kin count on the vote of yours to command!"

When he had had his drink Tom suggested:

"Cut it short, pairdner. We can't stay here all day."

"I must tell my story in my own peculiar way," replied Steve.

And he did. But as his "own peculiar way" consisted chiefly in spinning it out to an almost unendurable length, by burdening the account with digressions on his states of feeling, we will not weary the reader with a repetition of facts already known.

Suffice it to say that, partly from Steve, and partly from the obliging barkeeper, the Three Jolly Pards got a fairly accurate description of the outfit which the Jack of Hearts had beguiled its owner into parting with, and of the boy, Kid, whom he had enlisted in his service for some unknown purpose.

"Depend upon it," declared Harry, when they were again on their way, "this fellow is in league with Salomans."

He "put this and that together" as Banty had done.

"They ride together from the Flat to Fiddler's Ford. This sharp pretends to buy Salomans's horse. The horse disappears, and Salomans along with it, and we find the sharp back in the coach. Finally, he gets a disguise, and doubles back on his trail. Now, mark my words! We'll strike this precious pair following all along the route, and when we light upon one, we'll spot the other."

"But what's he g'wine to do wid dis hyeah kid?" asked Dick.

"Can't you guess? He's about the size of Miriam, by accounts. We'll have to look sharp, or we'll be led off on a wild-goose chase after this graceless little scamp in petticoats!"

When they came upon the Spanish Don and his bashful son, and found no further trace of the Hebrew and his daughter, Harry corrected this one defect in his unraveling of the plot.

Long before he reached the crossing just south of Grub Stakes, he "had the thing down fine."

"Hark!" he cried, suddenly reining in his horse. "Here's somebody coming down upon us at full speed."

"Let's take to cover an' git the drop on 'em, whoever they be," suggested Dick.

"It's too late. We've been heard, and— Why, it's the three Irishmen!"

"Dey must 'a' seen a ghost! Golly! dey's puttin' in fur keeps!"

"They must have seen something a great deal more interesting to us than ghosts."

And in sudden excitement the young deputy spurred to meet them.

"An' it's yerself!" cried Mallory, on recognizing the Pards. "The Lord be good to yez, but ye'r a fair sight."

"What is the matter?" demanded the young deputy.

"Don't sp'ake a worrud! Has the devil's own got by you, I dunno?"

"No one has passed us."

"Then he's taken to the crossin'."

"He? Who?"

"I wish I knew that. Sure, he had the look of a Gr'aser, an' the lying tongue of one, fur the matter o' that."

"What do you say? Was it a Mexican? Did he have a young boy with him?"

"Sure fur you."

"It is Salomans and Miriam!"

"Be the sowl o' me body!"

"Have you seen him? Did you let him pass you? Which way did he go?"

"Who but him lied to us? He came tearing down upon us, yelling fur us to look out fur a pair o' marauding devils—Cale an' Banty, no less."

"Oh, you should have known—you should have known! Where did you see him? How long has he been gone? How should a Mexican know anything about Cale and Banty?"

"That's what I said to meself whin we didn't find hide nor hair o' them."

"Find them? Of course not! He has fooled you."

The Irishmen began to curse in unison, but Harry soon called them to more profitable occupation.

By rapid questioning, he drew from them just what had happened.

In the course of the cross-examination, Mallory, in the attempt to palliate his having been so easily taken in, dropped a word that changed Harry's theory of the case all in a flash. He said that the voice of the seeming Mexican was not that of Salomans.

At once the young deputy reverted to his previous suspicions of the flash sharp who had figured so mysteriously in the case.

"A decoy!" he declared within himself.

He was now confronted by a terrible dilemma. He believed that the pretended Mexican had gone to the westward, and he could therefore send the Irishmen after him.

But if his theory was wrong, and it was indeed Salomans, then, if he eluded the Irishmen, Miriam might be lost forever; while, if the Irishmen overtook him, they would probably kill him.

Whatever the faults of the father, could the lover send a lot of murderers on his track?

On the other hand, if he himself went in pursuit of the Mexican, the Irishmen would be sure to accompany him, and all might be thus led away by a decoy.

The situation pressed for immediate solution. They were already at the crossing. Then came into play the young deputy's knowledge of human nature.

"It may be honestly a Mexican, after all," he said. "You did not go far enough to see whether they were indeed pursued. Do you go clear through to Grub Stakes, and see if you strike any traces of Cale and Banty, and I will take after this fellow."

But the Irishmen protested in a unit. They argued that the lover would naturally try to secure for himself the best chance of rescuing his sweetheart, and they did not propose to let slip this bird in the hand while they went beating the bush for two that might not be there.

"Well!" cried the young deputy, with an appearance of vexation, "this is no time for squabbling. We can't afford to waste all of our force on one chance. I will go to Grub Stakes. But if it proves to be Salomans, you must promise me not to harm his companion."

"The colleen? Faith, what have we ag'in' her?"

And so they separated.

At Grub Stakes Harry received what he believed to be confirmation of his theory.

The Mexican and the miner had not been seen to hold communication with each other, but they had had rooms in the "L," which was deserted in the early evening.

"Why should a miner take a sleeping room when he did not intend to stay over night?" reasoned the young deputy. "Of course he pretended to change his mind, on account of the bright moonlight. But he must have known that before. Then a genuine miner would not have thought of securing his room until it came time to turn in. Certainly he would not have occupied it before sunset in preference to the bar."

Lastly, two men answering to the description of Cale and Banty had been seen to ride through the camp and take the road southward almost on the heels of the Mexican, and the miner had left northward shortly after. Within an hour the two who had followed the Mexican had dashed into the camp, riding double, with the story that one of their horses had slipped and broken his leg. They had bought another, and instead of resuming their way of the earlier evening, had dashed northward, with the appearance of haste and excitement.

"That's enough!" cried the young deputy. "Salomans has tried to outwit his pards, and they somehow dropped to the decoy business. Come, fellows!"

And away they dashed, now on a hot trail.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SACRIFICE.

THE fugitives had gone scarcely five miles, when Salomans saw Miriam give a lurch in her saddle, and recover her balance with difficulty.

"What is the mater, my dear?" he asked, solicitously.

"I—I—I don't know, dear papa," she stammered.

"I feel so strange. I am faint—giddy."

Salomans muttered an oath below his breath.

"She will ruin all! Curse her woman's weakness! What can be done now?"

Miriam uttered a murmur that was half a moan, and clung to her saddle.

Apprehensive that she would fall, her father drew hastily to her side, and threw his arm about her.

"Papa!" she murmured, and sunk over against him, almost fainting.

Furious with rage, he drew up the horses, dismounted and lifted the sinking girl to the ground.

"Drink this," he said, holding a flask of liquor to her lips. "It will give you strength. We cannot stay here. We must keep on to the next camp, if no further."

She took a swallow, but the fiery liquor strangled her, and she put it away.

"Oh, let me die!" she moaned.

And sinking to the ground, she bowed her head on her arms, and burst into tears of utter wretchedness and despair.

"This will not do!" cried Salomans, with more harshness in his voice than he had permitted himself to manifest thus far. "You must get up and go on!"

But the girl was broken-hearted. It was more that than physical weakness. One thrill of gladness would have given her more strength than all the liquor in the world.

But her loved ones were lost to her, and the discovery of her father had brought no happiness. Simulate the outward forms of kindness as he might, that subtle sympathy which cannot be defined, but which the heart recognizes with unfailing certainty, was wanting between them.

In vain now did he appeal to her love, her duty, her fears. She lay panting, unresponsive to him, careless of what became of her.

Chafing inwardly, he was forced to wait to give her time to rally from the prostration of despair. But her state remained unchanged, until he was nearly frantic with rage.

Finally there came to them the clang of flying horses' hoofs.

"There! They are upon us!" he cried. "It is Cale and Banty! You have destroyed yourself, and baffled all my efforts."

She started up with a low cry of terror, and clung to him wild-eyed. But it was only like the flickering of dying embers. Her head sunk sideways, and she lapsed again into her state of apathy.

He caught her up in his arms, and ran with her off the road among the crags and undergrowth. If they could hide until the ruffians passed, they might yet escape.

Returning for the horses, which would betray him if left in the road, he no longer heard the hoof beats that had warned him of the approach of horsemen.

But there was no time for speculation or reconnoitering. He must act instantly, and trust to fortune for the rest.

So he sprang recklessly into the road, and clutched the horses' heads.

He had no sooner done so, than he heard a double click-click; and a voice, low, but vibrating with fiendish exultation, challenged him.

"Hold on, boss! We've got you! Hands up!"

What had given Cale and Banty this advantage, was the fact that just before the spot where Miriam had fallen there was a stretch of sandy road, so that they were almost directly upon him before Salomans was warned of their approach by hearing their horses strike harder ground.

In his excitement he did not estimate correctly the distance of the sounds, and Cale and Banty came up with his waiting horses in the moment while he was secreting Miriam.

They instantly drew up in the shadow of some trees.

"Hold yer vawp!" cautioned Banty, seizing Cale's arm, as the blunter ruffian was about to give voice to his exultation. "He's hyarabouts, somewhar. The gal's played out ag'in. Hark!"

It was the sound of Salomans's returning footsteps.

So, the instant he appeared, they "held him up."

The Hebrew saw that his game to elude his partners was now "up," for the time, at least; and he lifted his hands above his head, as commanded.

While Cale held him under his revolver, Banty dismounted and took from him his weapons and ammunition. The charges were drawn from his revolvers, and they were handed back to him, useless.

"That puts a quietus on you fur the present, an' now let's talk the matter over quietly," proposed Cale.

He dismounted, and sat down as if they had plenty of time before them.

"Waal, pard," he pursued, "you've done some tall figgerin', all fur to git away with the Three Jolly Pards. This hyar wa'n't so bad a scheme, to send the Don on the back track. We come nigh bein' shunted off the track by it ourselves."

"What do you propose now?" asked Salomans.

"I thought that that was all chalked down," replied Cale. "I marry the gal, an' we say no more about it."

"Look here," said Salomans, coming to a sudden resolve. "What will you take to call that thing off? I'll go half my share of the pile we did the Irishmen out of."

"Not by a dog-gone sight!" declared Cale. "It's the gal I bargained for, an' it's the gal I'll have!"

"Now hark to me! Thar ain't no use whitewashin' this hyar thing. You tried to shake us. I low that thar flash sharp offered you a bigger stake. But the thing won't work. We're down on you, my boy, an' we're down fur to stay!"

"Now hyar's the law, an' it's me as is a-layin' of it down. You tell yer gal that I'm yer solid friend, an' as how she's to marry me, with your full knowledge an' consent. That's what you do! An' ef you play off on me, I'll lay ye out, an' run the game myself."

There was nothing for it but compliance. Salomans had the grace to entertain one mental reservation.

"I'll have to knock under now, but I'll watch my

chance, and make a widow of her before she's a wife!"

Cale and Banty accompanied Salomans to where Miriam lay, and the Hebrew introduced them as his friends and hers.

The girl stared in terror and bewilderment. There was no outward show of compulsion. The best understanding seemed to exist between her father and these men whom he had but a moment before held up to her as the enemies before whom they were fleeing.

"Yes, marm," corroborated Cale, taking off his hat and bowing awkwardly. "Your ole man an' me is thicker'n thieves. We was boys together. I've loved yer for a long time, an' your ole man says to me, one day, ef I could git you away from the ole bloke what's up to Paddy's Flat, I could have yer fur my wife, an' he'd say *Bless ye, my children!* Waal, ye knows as how I tried to ketch on, the which the Jolly Pards wouldn't have it. Then your ole man says he'd try, an' you bet he'd fetch ye. 'Cause why?—'cause he'd have the law with him. So he made the rifle, an' hyar we be."

"Up the road, hyar, a piece, thar's a gospel sharp what's a pertic'lar friend o' mine. So, ef you please, we'll jest step up to the captain's office an' git hitched, an' say no more about it."

The girl only stared at him, shuddering.

Cale looked hard at Salomans.

"My dear," said her father. "This is the husband I have picked out for you. In this wild country you need a brave protector. With him you will be safe."

Safe!—with that monster!

Ah! this was the father against whom her kind old grandparents had tried to protect her! And she herself had gone to him, denouncing them!

She could only stare at him, as the bird stares into the gaping throat of the serpent that is charming it with the baleful glitter of its eyes.

He turned away, unable to bear the mute reproach of her gaze.

"Come!" he exclaimed, sharply, "let us be going."

There was now no show of weakness. She did whatever they bade her; but her silence was terrible.

"Pard," said Cale, with a sinister chuckle, falling a little behind with Salomans, "without 'lowin' to, you've run jest the way I marked out. I told ye when you got the gal, I'd have the parson, an' I've got him, you bet!"

It was in that darkest period just before dawn, the moon having gone down, when they came upon an old ruined adobe mission-house. The slighter structures that had once surrounded it had been leveled to the ground by time. The Indian devotees had been scattered; the priests had disappeared before the march of a new civilization.

This relic of the by-gone had been taken possession of by a man who claimed to have been a Protestant minister "in the States." Of what denomination, no one knew or cared. The boys "loved" he had had a p'ison diffikly with his congregation, an' had left fur the good o' the cause." He was now a poor wretch, drowning in drink the memory of a life "gone wrong."

The nearest mining-camp was a mile away; but the boys were wont to diversify the entertainment of Sunday gambling and drinking, by dropping over occasionally, to "give the parson a lift," as they said. Their one stipulation was, that he should earn the money they dropped into the hat by putting "a power o' brimston in the sarment."

Cale Burchard roused this wreck of manhood from the heavy sleep that follows a drunken debauch. Candles were lighted, and set upon the crumbling altar, to cast their light upon a half-obscured picture of Christ hanging on the cross, a rude wooden statue of the Madonna, in the last stages of decay, and a broken candelabrum.

Here, in attire that was a parody on the dress affected by the clergy, with breath reeking with the fumes of alcohol, and bloodshot eyes rolling heavily, stood this reprobate, lurching with unsteady balance as he waited, a dilapidated copy of the Bible in hand, to do the bidding of the villain who employed him.

The girl who was to be the victim of this impious farce stared at him as a part of the horror of her surroundings. Nothing was further from her thoughts than to appeal to such a brute for protection.

"Now, parson," said Cale, taking her unresisting hand, "drive ahead, an' see that you arn yer money by doin' the thing up brown. I want it to hold water, ye understand. Nothin' snide about *my step-in' off*, you bet yer life!"

"You kin tie to me, boss," was the response.

"I'll put you through in style."

And with the thick articulations of a liquor-paralyzed tongue, the ceremony began.

Once Miriam turned her eyes toward her father, in an appeal of dumb agony and wondering reproach.

He turned his face away.

Then, of a sudden, the air seemed filled with savage sounds. Scarcely with comprehension of what was going on, she saw those about her start in sudden alarm. There was the dull thud of hoofs, a chorus of fierce yells, and the rush of men into the further end of the mission-house, which the few candles could not illuminate with their feeble rays.

"Traitor!" yelled Cale Burchard.

At the same instant a revolver exploded in his hand, aimed at whom she knew not.

She saw Banty leap forward without speaking, and at one sweep dash the line of candles from the altar. Then all was as dark as Erebus!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE JOLLY PARDS TO THE RESCUE!

ALL about her were the sounds of rushing feet, of men stumbling, falling, but up and on again. Outside were yells and oaths and the rattle of firearms.

But one sound thrilled the deadened faculties of the girl into a mad ecstasy that seemed as if it would deprive her of reason. It was the sound of her name, called in accents that, as she recalled them in after life, never failed to set her nerves to vibrating and her heart to throbbing.

"Miriam! Miriam! Miriam! Where are you? Speak to me!"

Then how her voice rung out!

"Hahree! Hahree! Hahree!"

How did he reach her in the darkness? Neither ever knew. It was enough that he held her in his arms, while she clung to him, as if no power on earth could ever separate them for a moment again.

What to him were the escaping ruffians? He had the one object of his pursuit—had her safe beyond their power ever to harm her again.

"Dick! Tom!" he shouted.

But they were far away in headlong pursuit, not a step behind the Irish avengers. It was a strange voice that answered his call.

"What's wantin', boss?"

"A light," he replied. "Whoever you are, have you any matches?"

"You bet!" came the response. "I never travel without the *el-ceteras*."

The rasping scratch of a match was followed by a blue blaze, which in turn gave place to a bright illumination.

"The little Don!" cried Harry, catching sight of the holder of the match.

"The little humbug!" responded the Kid, with disgust in his voice. "Whar's them candles? Ah, hyar's what's left of 'em. When we've got a little more light on the subject, I'll fight any man what takes me fur a Greaser."

And he coolly proceeded to set the candles in place on the altar, and light them one after another.

"How did you come here?" asked Harry, while this restoration was in process.

"On hossback," replied the Kid, with his wonted nonchalance.

"But didn't you take the cross-road south of Grub Stakes in the early part of the night?"

"You bet, an' a mighty tough cross-road it was too—as crooked as a ram's horn, all up-hill both ways, and with the wind in yer face comin' an' goin'. But it come out at the right spot, an' don't you furgit it!"

By this time the speaker had finished lighting the candles, and he now turned, and bowing to Miriam with a grand sweep of his sombrero, addressed her:

"Miss, yer most obedient!"

But as the girl gazed at him suspiciously, clinging to the side of her lover, he went on:

"Don't you go fur to salt me down with that thar scallawag what you seen me with the fust time what I paid my respects to ye, if *you* please. Because why? I ain't o' the same stripe. Didn't I say ye could tie to me?"

"Have you seen this young lady before?" demanded Harry, with some sharpness.

He wanted it to be clearly understood that everybody was accountable to him where Miriam was concerned.

"Now jest you keep yer shirt on, my Christian friend, an' we won't have no fallin'—out," was the Kid's cool rejoinder. "The young lady seen me in bad company, an' I'm jest explainin' of things to her."

That his explanation was satisfactory was apparent, from the fact that a few minutes later both Harry and Miriam took his hand; and when with the break of day Tom and Dick returned, they were equally pleased with him.

With the Irishmen at his heels, and the Jolly Pards charging the bridal party, the Jack of Hearts saw that the game was up; and calling to the Kid to follow him, he "skipped." But the Kid had taken in the situation at a glance, or at least enough to satisfy him that there was something "crooked" in the game these masqueraders were playing, with Miriam figuring as the victim. He could make no mistake if he stuck by the girl; so he stayed.

His story added to Miriam's experience made everything clear; and when he saw the relations between Harry and Miriam, he took the former aside and advised:

"My Christian friend, you're a-buckin' ag'in' a bad lot, an' no mistake. Ef you want to git the inside track on that low-down dad, jest you marry the gal out o' hand! That thar don't cost ye nothin', but thar's millions in it!"

The thought electrified Harry. Here was the situation most favorable to his hopes. If he waited for Abraham's consent, his fears told him that all sorts of obstructions—religious difference, for one thing—might spring up in his way.

He pressed Miriam for a compliance with his wishes; and thoroughly convinced of her father's villainy, and seeing in this a sure protection from his cruel designs against her happiness, she yielded to the prompting of her own heart, intimating her consent with as pretty blushes as ever accompanied the bestowal of a trembling heart.

The minister had disappeared while the lights were out, but they had no use for such as he. Judge Owney Maglochin was holding court in a neighboring camp, and thither they rode, and presented themselves before him hand in hand.

"Age is it?" cried the merry judge, on Harry's supplementing a statement of their wishes with the assurance that he was of age on that very day.

"Be the sowl o' me body, but the th'afe o' the worruld that can st'ale a gerrul from her father the like o' this, is old enough to marry her anny day! Step up here just, till I tie yez up together like a bunch o' radishes!"

Whatever might have been their feelings under different circumstances, neither Abraham nor Rebecca ever said a word against this marriage. They held their darling once more in their arms, this time safe and sure, and that was blessing enough.

Rebecca got well and strong. The boys swore that "ef she kept on gittin' younger an' harnsomer," it wouldn't be long before she got to look like Miriam; but it "would be a cold day before Miriam ever looked like the old woman ag'in! Thar wa'n't to be no more masqueradin', ye onderstand!"

They were so delighted with the thing, that the whole camp fell to, and in an almost incredibly short time ran up an addition to Abraham's building, and furnished it "in A No. 1 style, you bet yer boots!" for the occupation of the bride and groom. At the grand "blow-out" of their installment, Jim Gladden acted as Master of Ceremonies, and never were marshal and deputy on better terms than those of Paddy's Flat.

There were four Jolly Pards henceforth; for the Kid coolly established himself as Miriam's Left Bower, graciously permitting Harry to be the Right.

Later it was discovered that Cale Burchard had given Isaac Salomans a mortal wound, so that he escaped the Irish avengers only to die in a neighboring camp.

Whether they succeeded in catching Cale or Banty was not positively known, but it was believed not.

So lifted the shadow from Miriam's life. She bloomed to new beauty in the happiness that had come to her, and the boys, of whom she had no further fears, were never denied the gracious sight. If you want to bring a whole camp about your ears, to the last man Jack, lift a finger or whisper a word against the Pride of Paddy's Flat!

THE END.

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